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BABY GRAND

BY

JOHN LUTHER LONG

AUTHOR OF "MADAME BUTTERFLY," "MISS CHERRY
BLOSSOM," "THE FOX-WOMAN,"
"NAUGHTY MAN," ETC.

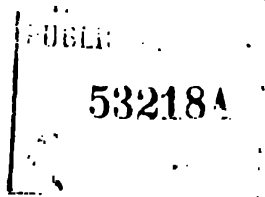


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To
FORTUNE'S VAGRANTS
Who, Principally, Inhabit this Book

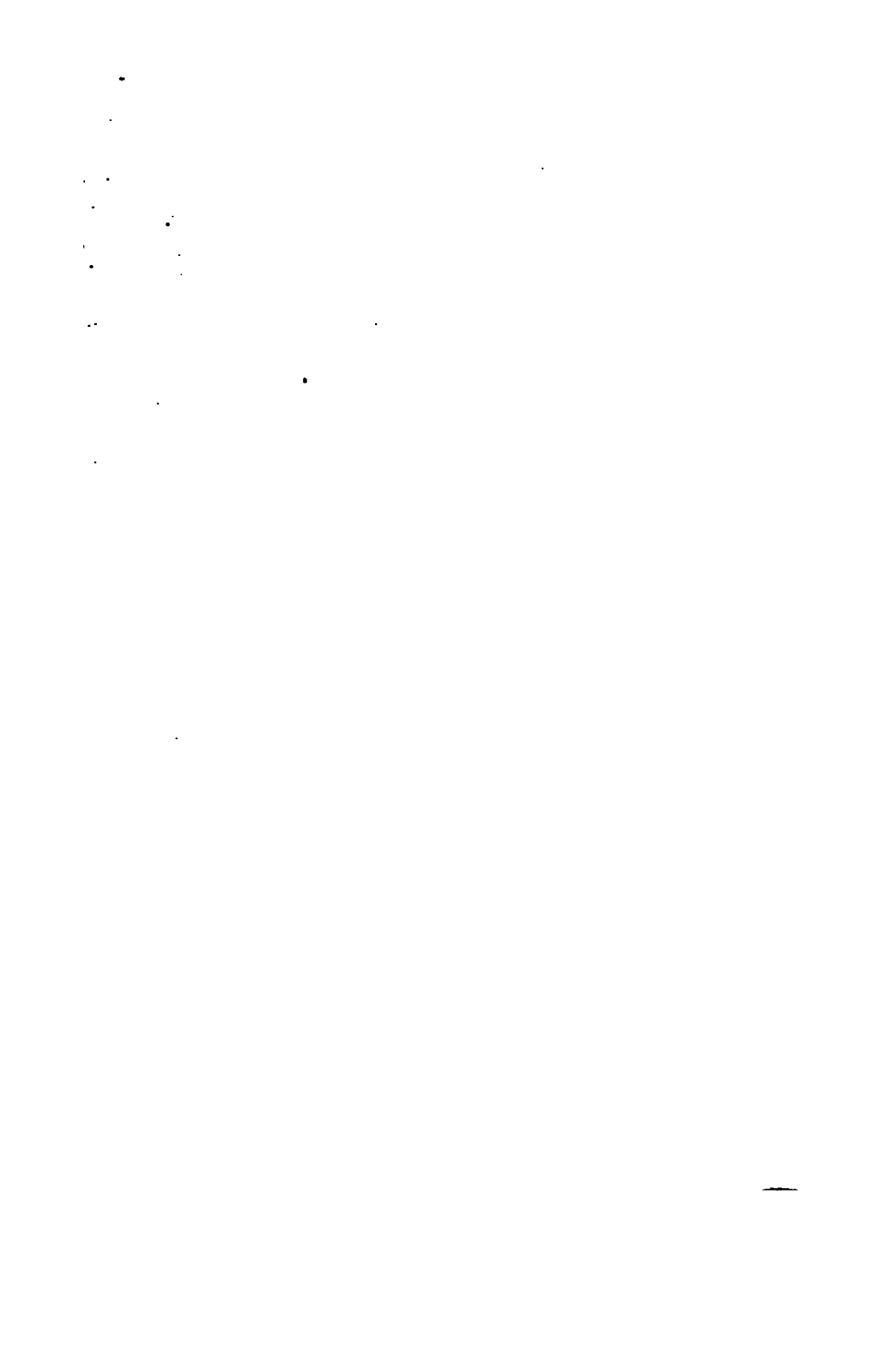
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BABY GRAND





dream of which it was ashamed, put its hand to its mouth, and replied:

"Ahoy, Lunk!"

For, from a time so long ago that I dislike to recall it, he had named me Lunkhead — perhaps because I once told him I practised the trade of author.

"Come aboard," he continued, poking the fire and relighting his pipe, trying to seem indifferent, as I approached.

"Rather sad," said I, when I had got my breath, "that look out to sea, Cap'n!"

"Right, mate," he nodded. "Got my notice to-day."

"What notice?" queried I.

"Quit."

He pointed, with his thumb, back to the station-house.

"What!" cried I. In fact it was hard to believe.

"Seem kind of funny 'thout Cap'n Jim on the beach, won't it, Lunk?"

"Funny?" said I, "it won't be the beach at all. Why it's —"

"Thirty-two year next Jenewerry sence I came on the crew. Seventeen year sence I been captain. Surgeon been here. Tested my eyes — hearing — color-blind — deaf! Hell," he broke out suddenly, "you think I'm too deaf to hear a

signal-gun? Ur too blind to see a rocket? He never tested these arms here! " He rolled up his sleeve and showed me the muscles — still mighty at seventy.

" You seen the surf-boat go out many a time, I expect."

" Many a time," nodded I.

" Well — did you ever see anybody but Cap'n Jim at the bow? "

" Never," said I.

" And who put her through the breakers? "

" You."

" Did any of the boys ever git away with me? "

" No."

" Well then! I suppose the Government knows its own business best. But it don't know me. I was born here. I know the capers of this sea better than any man living. I know what I can do with her and what I can't. That's the secret of my 'great swimming' — as you little fools calls it. Don't go ag'in' the sea. Nothing living can do that. Go with it. Humor it. Swim with the tide. Beat it slowly in the diagonal. That's it — and that's all. Oh, I'll be on hand. The boys says they wants me to keep near in case of trouble, and I'll not renig on the dear old boys. The Government won't kick me out of that house, though it's on their land. The boys'll all resign if it does. I built it myself,

mostly out of driftwood. Just a foolish box — but mine!”

He pointed over the hills of sand to where a light glowed in a small window in a small house where I had often been.

“So you ain’t ago’n to lose me just yet, Lunk. You’ll see me doing my watch on the beach and in the tower, and you’ll see the boys run to the little house down there when there’s trouble and they want old Jim’s stunts!”

He sat silent for a moment, then he went on, in a hushed voice:

“I don’t guess they’ll take my uniform from me?”

It was a piteous appeal to my knowledge. I knew nothing about it; but I said:

“I don’t suppose so.”

“If they don’t, I’ll wear it till it’s a rag! If they do, I’ll get another made. But I’ll put a ‘V’ in between the ‘S’ and the ‘L’!”

“For what?” asked I.

“For ‘Volunteer’” said Captain Jim proudly — “United States’ Vol-unteer Life Saving Service! U. S. V. L. S. S.”

He smoked his pipe, his eyes on the hills. I took surreptitious occasion to light one of the cigarettes he hated. Jim never noticed it. Instead, after a long, thoughtful silence, he asked irrelevantly:

"Lunk, you think you're a wise guy. Well, say, did you ever get accused of taking advantage of a dead woman or one that's mislaid her mind?"

I had to tell him that I had had no such experience.

"You don't know much, after all," he mused. "I expect no one knows how to explain to a woman that's dead that he didn't. But mebbby there's a way! I dunno. I expect a fellow's got to go and find out — if there is a way."

When I wondered at all this from reticent Jim, he checked me by laboriously taking up the subject we had dropped for the moment — telling me thus that it was none of my business — his own little private aberration.

"Oh, I'll be here," he said again. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks. But he don't forget the old ones!"

"You used to be the best swimmer I ever heard of —"

He cut me off with a snort.

"Used to be! You one them kind, too, thinks a man's done at seventy? Say, do you want to swim out to that there bar and back?"

He pointed to where the surf broke in tumultuous white about a mile out. I said that I did not.

"Who taught you to swim, you dam' lunkhead — the little I could beat into you?"

"You did, Captain Jim," I admitted humbly.

"And you say 'used to be'!"

I mollified him by my humility.

"Why, say, they hinted that if I'd shave off this here beard, so's I'd look younger, and lie about my age, they'd keep me on a little longer!"

"Well, why don't you do it?" I said, a bit ineptly.

"There you go again! She liked that beard, dam' you — and all the lunkheads and Government mules on earth can't make me shave it off — or lie about my age!" he ended. "She liked *that!*"

"I believe there is some regulation about the wearing of beards in the service," said I, in supine apology. "They are not considered smart — especially white ones."

"Well, this here one won't be shaved or painted — green, yellor, red or blue — like I've seen 'em painted; because *she* liked it — though it wasn't white then — and I'd rather have *her* like it than — Oh, hell!"

He checked himself there again, as if he had unwittingly and garrulously opened a door for me which he had thus far kept closed.

"What are you doing to me to-night, Lunk? I can't keep my face shut!"

"Don't try to keep it shut, Captain Jim," laughed I.

"Mebby it's her," he said uneasily. "Mebby she's beginning to understand!"

II—THE MAUSOLEUM OF SAND

NOW, there had been a whisper of some romance in Captain Jim's life, but not for all my wooing of the loyal men did I ever hear anything more than a whisper. So this voluntary mention of "her" made me sit up, and wonder whether Captain Jim was at last off guard, in this, as in the service. I did not know how to lure his secret out of so rugged a hero as Jim, and so I proceeded cautiously.

"Her?" asked I, as if I had never before heard the pronoun. He fell to my lure.

"She's over there," said Captain Jim briefly, pointing to the tallest of the back hills—one which I had often explored because it was such a mass of thorny and impenetrable roots among which the sand had built with unusual stability—the hill growing taller with each year as the drifting stormsand accumulated in the fresh vegetation. Its top was strangely crowned with pink and white flowers.

"Don't go and tell all your fool friends about it," said Captain Jim roughly, "it's ag'in' the law to bury anybody here. But I wanted her about —

so's she could be near — the place — where it happened — when I get my chance to explain."

He stopped suddenly, and for a long time smoked and said nothing. Nor did I.

"Dunno what's the matter with me. Never wanted to talk about it before. Seems like she's asting me to do it. Wonder if that's the way the dead apologizes?"

He turned and looked inquiringly toward the sandy mausoleum, which, when one took one's eyes from the fire for a moment, would grow, in an uncanny fashion, upon one.

"Why," he said, "it's dark as hell, but I can see the flowers! Can you?"

I shook my head, and said that I could not.

"But," I added, "I have often wondered how they got there — someone must keep them soaked in water. They are pink and white mallows, and they grow, usually, only in the marsh."

"Someone does keep 'em soaked," he said gently. "You think you're wise, but you don't know anything. You didn't know that she was there, and you don't know that there are thirteen men under this wrack!"

I moved precipitately.

"Set still," admonished Captain Jim. "They won't hurt you. They're dead."

"Oh!" said I with laughing relief, taking my seat again.

"Perfectly safe," grinned Jim. "Been dead thirty-two year. Yit, the Government won't let no one be buried here! We laid 'em down here as they drifted in, and put a little sand over 'em till the undertaker could git 'em. But they and the ship didn't want to part. This here piece of her come in on the biggest tide we ever had here and slammed down right on top of 'em. The boys just concluded that God Almighty knew how he wanted 'em buried, even though he may'nt have understood their lingo, and shut their mouths and let 'em stay. So this wrack's their tombstone, Lunk. God, what a night that was! Shot all our life-lines out, and none of 'em caught till the last. And when they had it they didn't know what to do with it, though you know there's a tag in seven languages which tells 'em to let the block free when they fasten it up. Well, they fastened it up, but the cable didn't run free because the lubbers tied a knot in it. Then we tried both the boats, the patent one and the old stand-by, and both came back smashed — so'd we but for our cork jackets. Some fool sings out:

" 'Jim, swim to her! ' "

"Well, I done it. I run down the beach and then started, tide and surf with me, and worked out. When I got there, they was all gone but a woman. All I could see was that she *was* a female. You know a woman will hold on longer

than a man, though she doesn't look it. The unlucky thirteen of 'em, I suppose, like the foreign lubbers they was, had tried to slide down the life-line — when they'd been able to ride home like in a Pullman if they'd had sense enough to let us get the breeches-buoy to 'em — and been washed off. But they'd left her behind, or else, I dunno, the woman had better sense. So I lashed her to me like we was one, and not taking time to undo their work with the life-line, went down hand over hand. I didn't know but she was dead. The boys thinks that lashing her close to me, that way, sort of warmed her and pumped her up and started her living again. We took her to my little house of driftwood, as we had took many another, and during the night she woke up and looked about her.

“ Well, I sort of looked about myself when her eyes opened and followed me in all the corners, dark and light — just like you've seen a baby do — for no reason on earth. Never moved her head — just the big eyes — till I felt haunted. They reminded me of something I seemed to have forgotten and had always wanted. Danged if I know yit what!

“ She didn't have much curiosity for a day or two, until I give back to her the little Bible we'd found in her breast, printed in columns and in three languages — French, Spanish and English.

It was a pretty little thing, and I had just about got it dried out and thought she might want to pray. But what she does is to jabber in some lingo I never heard before. I shook my head. Then she motions for a lead pencil and I gets her one. She searches a long time in the Bible, and underlines three words she finds there, in the Spanish column, and tells me by motions to find what they mean in the English column. I done it — not failing to notice what a beaut she was when she really woke up. In the English column the words read:

“ ‘Who — am — I?’ ”

“ ‘Lord!’ says I, ‘don’t you know who you are?’ ”

“ ‘When she had studied that out, making me repeat it five or six times, and taking the shape of my mouth, she shakes her head ‘No.’ Well, you bet that’s one on me — a lot of ’em! Asting me, a perfect stranger, to tell her who she is! She looks around the room and underlines five words in the Book:

“ ‘Where — did — I come — from?’ ”

“ ‘I points to the sea, but she didn’t seem to understand, and I let it go at that, thinking it best, mebby, that she didn’t know who or what she was.

“ ‘How — did — I get — here?’ she tries on me next. But by that time I’d learned a thing or

two and just shook my head, like I didn't know.

" 'Who — are — you?' she ast next, in the same way.

" Then *I* got busy with the pencil and the Book. There was no Jim in the Bible that I could see, so I just marked under 'G' in Genesis, and 'I' in Kings and 'M' in Moses and shows it to her. She looks at me a long time, and I can see her putting the letters together, right, left, up and down — no, it was no go. She shakes her head and turns over like a baby and goes to sleep. Well, she looked like a baby when she slept. I'd fed her up and her face was round and peaceful, and her hair had got the salt out of it and clung about her face in thick waves — like the surf in a west wind, when it just curls up on the beach and returns satisfied — as graceful as a kitten. She plays the part fine, Lunk.

" As I looks her over, I says to myself, says I:

" 'You infernal loafer, you don't want her to know who she is or where she comes from. You want to keep her!' And that there wasn't far wrong, Lunk. I was mean enough to be glad she'd lost her mem'ry out there in the sea that night and I was meaner enough yit to hope that she'd never find it — no more than most things are found which git lost in the sea. But, Lunk, old man, I didn't forgit — any time in the next five year — that lost things have a habit of com-

ing ashore! She seemed to be that thing I'd always wanted and couldn't remember — couldn't remember.

"Then, one day, when I come home, she was up and dressed. Say, Lunk, that was another on me — several! A man's a fool when it comes to taking care of a woman. One woman can take care of ten men, but ten men can't take care of one woman. The whole crew had never thought that she might get out of bed and need clothes. She'd come ashore in her nightie. So, when I got home, there she was in a pair of my white sailor trousers, and my best uniform jacket, looking as pretty as a toy. She flew behind the bed and blushed and jabbered in that lingo, and I takes the Bible and tells her, after a half hour's work:

" 'Lady — clothes — to-morrow.'

"She laughed and clapped her hands and seemed real happy. I seen that her feet was bare — and, God, how small and white they were! You and me are used to big feet. But her'n!"

He looked down at my feet sorrowfully.

"Well, I got the crew together, for we always consulted about the Baby Grand — as Selly Bane, who used to play the piano in his worse days, named her, and we made a trip to Cox's on the main, and bought things for her. Then we all went to the house to present them. You never see or hear such a laugh as the Baby Grand gev'

us! But she thanked us in that lingo and took the clothes.

"They was about two bushels. Things with ribbons and things with lace. Some we didn't know the bow or stern of — no, not one of us! There was about half a peck of bum jewelry — all that Ben had in the store. They was two pairs of slippers — one red and one blue, and they was the only things that really fitted. I had measured her foot-prints on the floor after she had come in wet from the sea. She just loved to bathe, and she done it like a mermaid. She looks 'em over and asts what some of 'em is and no one, married or single, knows!

"She held some of 'em up to herself to show us that they were mostly for a woman six feet tall, while she was about four, except the baby clothes which Ben Cox had stuck us with, telling us they was longery. Hell, she was still in my clothes, and her dark blue hair was floating down her back. Well, the boys was all crazy about her, and none of 'em kept it a secret.

"Of course every day some fool on the crew ast the other fools what we go'n to do with her, but there was always some other fool, still, mostly me, to answer: 'Wait. She ain't well. When she gets well —'

"Wally, who was a sort of a bad sea-lawyer, he says we'll all sure be arrested and jugged for en-

ting a minor, et cettre, and what would her people think, and the Government, and the public, if it knew."

" 'The public be damned,' says I, 'and it don't know — and it won't — if you u'ns keep your heads shut.'

"There was only one room in the house — and that was her'n. The outside was mine. She hinted after the clothes come that for a few days she would like to be alone, and I let her be — sending the things to cook through the kitchen window. Such cooking! I use to do better when I was three year old — and I was afraid that she'd die of self-poison before she raised the quarantine. It was a close shave, I expect, for when she let me in, she was pale and tired, but dressed to kill. If I'd tell you what she'd made out of them bum clothes Ben Cox stuck us with, you'd play your harp and call me a liar.

"She had on a thing with a long tail to it thin enough to blow away, and all that half peck of bum jewelry — head, ears, nose — no, not nose — neck, arms, fingers, toes for what I know — though they was covered with the red slippers. I marks that she looks like a bride, and she laughs and makes like she'd hug me — and then regrets it.

III — PEACE — AND COURT PLASTER

“ **A**FTER that she was one of the crew — or mebbly I'd better say the whole crew. Once in a while she'd do her watch with one of the boys, only I felt funny here inside when she done it with any one but me, and though no one seemed to know her lingo, she got along in a way with her fingers and the old Bible.

“ When she'd walk my beat with me she'd hang onto my arm and hop over the wet places like a dam' sand-snipe or a little toad — just as I've seen Americans do. A regular up-to-date kid!

“ Wally kep' up that talk about us harboring a minor against the law, and I says:

“ ‘ She's happy here, ain't she? ’

“ ‘ So's a lunatic 'at don't know! ’

“ ‘ Lunatic! ’ says I. ‘ You'll take that back! ’ and I wades in to see to it.

“ But the boys stops me that time.

“ One night Bilge Pharo says to me:

“ ‘ ‘ Sleep, ain't she? ’ p'inting to the house.

“ ‘ You bet, ’ says I. ‘ No Baby Grand is going to be up at the midnight watch in my house! ’

“ ‘ Don't be so stuck on that! ’ says Harper

Hills. 'I got a house too. And I don't see why she wasn't taken there!'

" 'Because I'm your captain, dam' you!' says I.

" 'That's right, boys,' says Wally. 'Cap'n Jim's got the first right to her.'

" 'Not on your life!' says Sam Bray, slamming his pipe, ferocious, into the stove.

" 'Look here,' says I, 'do you fellows think that dago girl, or whatever she is, is yearning for any of you?'

" About six of the eight jumps up and says:

" 'Yes!'

" They didn't stop me that time, Lunk. You hear? They didn't stop me."

I let him quietly enjoy, over again, this fight against his equals — ten to one! He laughed a bit, and went on presently:

" Well, Lunk, there was a fight then and there in the U. S. L. S. S. and, as usual, I didn't git left, though the stove was broke open and the place afire by the time we was done.

" 'Say, boys,' says Farley Price, who had two drooping eyes in the finish, and who was brought up to the ministry before he joined, 'there's just one way to settle this. It's not decent, this here keeping that young thing hid among ten men. Some one's got to marry her!'

" 'Sure!' they all yells.

“ ‘Mebby you’d better ast the lady’s advice,’ says I.

“ ‘Sure!’ they all agrees again.

“ ‘And,’ says Farley, ‘ye got to agree that the man she accepts is it, and all of us got to be friendly. This here disturbance in the U. S. L. S. S. is shameful. I admit that Captain Jim has the call! Let us have peace — and some court plaster.’

“ ‘Correct,’ says all the dead and wounded.

“ ‘Well, I wasn’t afraid of that game no more than any other I’ve been in. ‘All right,’ says I, ‘I’ll go you’s all, though I sort o’ think that I’ll ’tend to the marryin’ and givin’ in marriage of Baby Grand myself.’

“ ‘Looking around upon the carnage, I says: ‘Funny, seems like I’d won out and don’t need to agree to nothin’. But I do — not on account of any of you dead and wounded, but on account of the lady. I don’t take advantage of no woman. If she likes any of you better’n me when she’s looked you over aside of me — she’s your’n and you’re her’n. Come along and have another try with Baby Grand as umpire, if you’re not satisfied.’

“ ‘Square, boys!’ says Bilge, my worst rival. ‘Yere’s my hand, Jim, somewhat broke in the wrastle, but friendly, win or lose!’

“ ‘And all the rest does the same.

"So we hikes up to the house and pounds till we wakes her up gentle. The Baby Grand is surprised, but we plays fair. All sets around and I gets the Bible and hunts out that there yarn about Ruth. 'Whither thou goest I will go. Thy people shall be my people,' and so on, and marks the whole thing. But she don't understand. Then I hunts out the letters for:

" 'Marry — one — of — us?'

"She understands that, all right, like women is made to understand it, and she's scared for five or six minutes, looking us over careful. Then she underlines, trembling:

" 'Must I?'

"I showed it to 'em and they all nods.

" 'No — other — way?' she scratches ag'in.

"And we all nods.

"Well, it's pitiful — that little thing trapped among us all. But I knew that if I didn't take her one of the others would.

"Mebby you think, like Farley, Lunk, that it wasn't right. But where'd she gone to if we'd turned her loose? What do you suppose she'd done for a living with them little hands and feet? She's a regular baby — and a foreign one — a stranger into a strange land. Why, say, she'd either died of homesickness for us, or fell into the clutches of one of them white-slavers. Why, Lunk, she'd mislaid her mind so entirely on that

night that she was beginning all over again. And I tell you, she was happy with us. No one was ever happier."

I gently intimated to Captain Jim that he need not defend his course to me. I went so far as to intimate that I should have done precisely as he did.

"Besides," he went on, in utter ignorance of my encouragement, "she was that thing I always wanted and forgot about. Lunk, I played fair, before the Lord, I did!"

I said again that I had no doubt of it.

"But she had," mourned Jim, returning to the course of his narrative.

"Which?" I marks.

"She looks us all over for the last time, then comes and puts her hand in mine.

" 'To-morrow at ten, gents,' I says, 'good night.'

"Well, they're game — the boys were just as game as when they're putting the boat through the surf. And they all walked up to the captain's office and shook hands and wished us both happiness.

" 'I'll get the preacher,' says Wally.

" 'They's only a colored one,' says Pete.

" 'Don't bother about the shade,' " laughs I.

"Pink 'll suit me."

" 'I'll bake the cake,' adds Farley, and Ben

says he'll gather flowers and vines and desecrate the premises.

"And we could see 'em, busy all night at the station, cooking and baking and making festoons and garlands of mallows and bayberry and marsh roses.

"And say, Lunk, that there sure looked good to me!

"But when they're gone, Baby Grand begins to cry, just like she's American, and presently scratches:

" 'Wait?'

" 'Git — the — laugh!' I answers.

" 'What is that?' she underlines.

"It took the rest of the night to explain. She was weakening.

" 'Ain't I been pretty good to you?'

" 'Yes,' she nods.

" 'Don't you trust me?'

" 'Yes,' she nods again.

" 'Don't you think I can keep on being kind to you?'

" 'Yes.'

" 'Then — why?'

" 'Do — not — know,' she scratches.

" 'Daylight,' says I, pointing out of the window. She nodded. It had taken us that long to say that little. 'Ten o'clock,' I ends — for that's the way to do with women. If you let 'em

argue they'll chase you all over the world and back, and begin again. What they want is a captain!

"Well, it come off according to schedule, the Reverend Micah Bell, colored, officiating, and Wally acting as worst man — without his jealousy. The crew in their white uniforms.

"Baby Grand was dressed in that thin white thing, with a crown of white mallows on her head, all the bum jewelry on her hands and feet and arms and neck — no, not on her feet. The red slippers was there — about as long as my hand, Lunk. And the little house down there looked like it had been growing flowers on the inside all its life! I can smell the bayberry yet!

"But, Lunk, the surprise of the whole thing was the Baby Grand herself! Gay as a lark, Lunk! And I had thought I was forcing her to marry me against her will!

"Why, Lunk, she kissed me right in the middle of these here whiskers the Government wants me to mow! And say, Lunk, she wouldn't kiss the rest of 'em — simply wouldn't — though I nearly licked her to make her do it!

"'One — man — woman,' laughs she, in the best English she had at that time. One man's woman," repeated Jim.

And he fell silent with that morsel under his tongue! I knew that this was the perihelion of

his narrow little life, and that at seventy it was still sweet on his lips and in his honest soul! All the years, perhaps, that thought had made melody in his life! One man's woman! And that one man himself!

"You see," Jim went on presently, "she was born on that night. I helped at her borning. She had never had anything to do with another man. Oh, afterward, yes! But *that* life — the one she lived here, was mine — and no one else's!"

Another silence, and then:

"And there were five years between that and that. Dam' happy ones!"

He pointed, respectively, to the little house and the flower-crowned hill.

"She soon learns a little English — the funniest you ever heard! I'd mark the word in Spanish and English, and make the sound and point to the thing it was about, and she'd imitate. And it was mighty bully. After that, when we walked my beat together, it was different — and better, Lunk. It was arms all round! Say, Lunk, I'm fond of you. As fond as I ever was of a lubber. You're smart, but you lie about it and make people think you ain't. Well, that looks good to me — a not casting all your jewelry before rooters. I wish you happiness, and the best'd be just what I had here them five years:

this little island — her — nothing else! Nothing else!" repeated the life guard.

And I let Captain Jim duly enjoy this exquisite retrospect! After all, he had his heart's desire! Then again he went on — not joyously now:

"Then, one night, I hears a shriek in my sleep. Well, I've heard them — often dreamed them too, when there was a storm-surf. And there was one that night. When I woke, a candle was on the shelf over the bed, and Baby Grand had me by the throat with both hands, and was staring into my face and pushing her knees into my chest.

"'What I do here?' she was yelling. 'Where my hosban?' You kill him! I kill you!'

"Say, Lunk, that there was a different Baby Grand! The fearful eyes — the little clutching, stabbing hands. You'd never have believed that Baby Grand could turn into that. It was like another had been born — like that other night!

"'You have touch me — devil! You have defile me! See! Holy Virgin! I am in your bed!'

"And, Lunk, such sobs and shrieks you never heard — never letting go my throat. Such prayers — for mercy — for vengeance — for restoration to some one! Then she beats my face — batters it like iron with those little fists —

you'd never think she could — till I was blind and bloody — crazy.

“ ‘What you hafe done with him? Tell me — I will not kill you till you do — then you must die — you demon — defiler — dog. With me was he last night — he went — in the great wind — water — He said, “Wait, I will come back for you!” I wait — on a ship — and now — I am here — devil — devil — devil!’ ”

“She started to pound me again, but the wind rose in a sudden piercing shriek wilder than her own — as human — and she stopped to listen.

“ ‘Yes,’ she shrieked back, then, in answer. ‘Pasquale! I wait —’

“She turned to look again at me.

“ ‘No! I come! Wait *you?*’ ”

“She turned again upon me.

“ ‘First I must kill him who touched me! Made me impossible to you!’ ”

“Then comes a terrific shriek of the wind through the ports in the watch-tower, and she doesn't stop to kill me, but just floats out of the house — before I comes to enough to understand that her memory has come back — and is lost before the crew can get into their clothes — you know how quick they can do that — and we hears that ‘Pasquale!’ twice — three times — each further away.

“We patrols the beach and the surf for three

days, but we gets nothing. Then she comes ashore — and we puts her there. I plants the flowers and keeps them wet. I suppose *he* is here under us — the other man. The boys promise to put me with her, on the quiet, when I go out. They give me a pension for two years, and I expect that'll be about enough for me. I'm rather crazy to meet the Baby Grand ag'in, under the hill. Mebby I'll get the chance to explain that I didn't do that. I didn't know about the other man — and she didn't. She's got to understand that. We played fair — both."

Silence.

"She may be sorry by now. I dunno."

"I think she is," said I.

Our silence continued until Jim's pipe went dry. Then he said, more to Something Else than to me:

"Wonder why I told you? Whether she —"

He looked away to the darkling hill.

"All right," he nodded. "She done it herself. Something's doing when she's so anxious to make me talk. I wonder what it is. Baby Grand, we're not through!"

After another silence, he turned to me and said:

"Now, Lunk, you can go and forget it. I'll go and talk to her a bit."

This was my dismissal. I went without a

word. And, as I turned, a little way off, I could see a dark figure slowly mounting the flower-crowned hill. I knew the questions Jim would be asking there, in a moment. I suppose he had been asking them for many long years! They involved an honest man's honor — with the dead!

IV — CAPTAIN JIM'S LAST STUNT

THAT was two years ago; and, quite as Captain Jim had foretold, two years were about enough. Though he wasn't with Baby Grand under the hill, perhaps his questions are answered.

Last night I walked up the beach and stopped at the new station-house, and Captain Sam told me how it was. Captain Sam was young and looked smart in his uniform, but, withal, he was modest, as he should have been, with the memory of Captain Jim as a predecessor. Indeed, in hands such as those of the new captain, the reputation of Captain Jim will never be diminished.

"What bothered Cap'n Jim all his life," said Captain Sam, "was that she went away believing that he'd do such a thing to a woman!"

I said *that* was another woman — she who believed it.

"Cap'n Jim kept his word. He always done that. He stood his watch, pulled his oar, put that new letter on his coat, kept his beard, and let me act as captain over him — which was mighty embarrassing at times. Well, his night come — to

ast and answer her — about as thick as they say that'n was when the *Almina* come ashore thirty-four year ago. Only it was *The Saint James* this time. Jim heard the guns and the hurry-up rockets and come a' running. I guess I was a little rattled. Nothing seemed to work right. We couldn't git a boat through, and had fired all but the last of our lines — none taking effect. Then Jim done his old swimming stunt. He run up the beach with a line in his teeth, and come down with the tide. I never knew another man who could do it. No one saw him after he got into the dark outside the line of our fire, but we soon knew that he had got there, for a line was running free from the fore-mast, which still stood, to our shore-mast. And down they come in the breeches-buoy, three at a time — they was so scared — twenty-seven of 'em — the most we ever took off here. Every soul got ashore but Jim. He hasn't come yet. First mate admitted grabbing the line out of his mouth — you can bet he was weak after that swim — a man of seventy-two — instead of helping him aboard with it — he was so rattled. The twenty-seven left money for a monument for Jim. But we decided that he'd be mad if he should come back and see a monument. The only monument Jim ever gave or would take was this here!"

Captain Sam held out a "helping" hand.

"If he ever comes ashore we'll shove him into that there hill with her, and say nothing. That's where he wanted to be. And you bet there'll be a-ting and answering under that hill to beat the band. Jim'll never rest till he makes her understand that he didn't do it. And he'll show her in that funny little Bible he took along where it says, 'He that loveth and suffereth much, forgiveth much;'" though I am not sure of the accuracy of Captain Sam's Scripture.

I said, rather inanely, that I was sorry. The tragedy of it all was deeply upon me. Jim ought to be under the hill with her.

"Sorry?" said Captain Sam. "Don't you be sorry for Jim. That's the way he'd a' wanted to go. But that's not where he wanted to stay — out there,— where he can't find out nor tell nothin'. You kin be sorry for that there!"

I said sincerely that I was.

"What would you do with that there money the twenty-seven left?" asked Captain Sam.

I said, once more, invertebrately, that I did not know. He would know best.

"I think," he said musingly, "I'll plant some more flowers. I'll cover the whole dam' hill with 'em! *That* ought to tell her *something!*"

Though, I suppose, the money the twenty-seven left had nothing to do with that. Captain Sam could send Baby Grand Jim's flowers without money.

**TOM, DICK, AND HARRY — ET
CÆTERA**

TOM, DICK, AND HARRY — ET CÆTERA

TOM, Dick, and Harry — besides Et Cætera — starved genteelly in the winter, and lived “upon the land” — as the militarists say — (and the sea, too!) in summer. Harry was a great composer, and would weave, in the halcyon summer-time, to the diapason of the waves, the perfume of the breezes, the flame of the lightning, or the thunder of the storm, splendid melodies for the winter.

Now, the composer, like geniuses always, had his unique passions. One of these was, like Prometheus, for fire. So the four would steal saturninely far up the beach, most often at night, and, with a bundle of newspapers, a bottle of coal-oil, and a box of matches, concealed about their several persons, gather driftwood in the lee of one of the wrecks which showed their bleaching ribs above the sand, and fire the stout oak. Then they would sit, like uncanny red shades, in the light of the flames and eat the things Dick and Et Cætera had provided against the hunger the flames produced.

And it happened upon one of these *noctes ambrosianæ* — as they had named them — never to be forgotten, that Thomas, who was a lawyer when he had clients, in the winter, and a poet when he had none, in the summer, sitting in the magical, mysterious light of the fire, when anything, even a good joke, is possible, wrote as follows:

“ Know all men, by these presents, that I, John Smith, of Smithfield, smith, being of sound mind, memory, and understanding, do hereby make and ordain this, my last will and testament, in the following words, to wit, hereby revoking and making void any and all wills, codicils, or writings and memoranda in the nature thereof, by me at any time heretofore made.

“ *Imprimis*: Despairing of finding an honest man in my own country, and being in imminent danger of shipwreck, and being possessed, in my own right, in fee simple, of some thirty millions of pounds, I hereby give, devise, and bequeath unto him who shall first take into his hand this writing meant to be and to be taken as and for my will, he, his heirs and assigns, from, and of, whatsoever country he may be, each and every, the said some thirty millions of pounds, *provided*, only, that he shall prove to the satisfaction of my executors that he *is* an honest man.

Item: I limit the title and possession of the said some thirty millions of pounds, only in this, that I desire my devisee to erect to my memory, should the imminent shipwreck take place, a suitable monument reciting the above bequest, his own certitude of honesty, and his gratitude.

"Signed, sealed, published, and declared, before these witnesses, who, in my presence, and the presence of each other, at my request, have attached their names as witnesses, as and for the last will and testament of me, the said John Smith, of Smithfield, smith, on the first day of August, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and nine.

JOHN SMITH. (Seal.)

"Witness:

Harry Grosskoph,
Richard Shay,
Et Cætera."

Thomas then enclosed the document in a bottle (making certain that it was quite empty), drove the cork well home, and threw it into the sea.

"Do you suppose," mused Dick, on the way home, "that there *might* be such a possibility as a John Smith, smith, living in a place called Smithfield?"

Richard always had these strange thoughts.

"And having thirty millions of pounds!" gibed Harry. "Oh, of course!" By which he characterized its utter impossibility.

Three days later, when we were having exercises with the medicine ball on the upper beach, something collided with the toe of the little Etc., heading off the ball from the surf.

"It's our bottle!" cried the composer, taking it rudely out of the hands of Et Cætera.

"No," said Dick. "It is open."

"Of course!" declared Et Cætera. "Some one has found it and taken the will out of it!"

"What now?" asked the cryptical Dick.

"Now there'll be trouble," said little Et Cætera.

"Trouble?" questioned Richard.

"Some one will go to get that thirty millions!" said Harry, with the solemn certitude which was always his.

"Nonsense!" laughed the poet. But the dire prophecy did not leave his mind.

"I believe," said Dick, gayly, "that we've got Tom frightened!"

"Well," said Etc., comfortlessly, "you never can tell!"

"I've known some very — very" — the poet looked all about fearsomely — "strange things to happen!"

"From fool jokes!" supplemented Harry, as comfortlessly.

Tom was easily frightened — about an injury to another — and the worried look did not leave his face for several hours. But then he wrote a poem to the saffron sun — which he had seen to be saffron that very morning — over the pink sea — for the first time — and in the glow of it forgot to be further frightened.

Even though Putter Peterson — as he was called, though his name was Peter Putterson — asked him, on the beach, three days later, as he was patrolling his "watch" (he was a life-guard), whether he, who had known Peter for many years, would be willing to certify that he was an honest man.

"Certainly!" said Thomas, at once, never thinking of the bottle.

"Peter Putterson. I hereby certify," he wrote, once more, with the composer's fountain-pen, "that this is an honest man.

"THOMAS DUNN."

"Thank you," said Peter, hurrying away.

The poet had to think constantly of his poems if he would live, and the composer of his compositions if he would do likewise, and Richard and the little Et Cætera of things to eat, for the same reason, so that it happened that neither of them

thought of the certificate of honesty until a month had passed. Then Et Cætera, who usually had these certitudes, said very suddenly one day:

"Putter Peterson found that will!"

"What will?" snapped the composer, returning from the melody which whispered in his mind and had taken him afar. For the tone of Et Cætera was such as to fix the attention of even a composer with a melody whispering in his mind.

"The one Thomas wrote and put into the bottle," said Richard, with as great conviction as Et Cætera.

"Lord!" said the lawyer, under his breath.

"Let no guilty man escape," laughed the composer, clutching the poet as if to detain him.

"Stop!" cried Dick, forcibly taking Harry's arm away. "Don't you see that Tom is scared! *He's* serious, and we've got to be. For we are all as guilty as he. Haven't we all from time to time taken foolish messages out of bottles on the seashore? Did any one of us ever take them seriously?"

"That's nice," said the poet, comfortably.

"If there should be — tri — throuble," said Etc., bravely, "we'll all meet it together — like we do the return of a manuscript!"

"But a joke gone wrong is a fearful thing!" sighed Tom. "Worse than any returned manuscript or score."

They were not far from the life-station where Peter served, and all went there.

"Pete," said the captain, "got funny about a month ago, drawed all his money, which I keeps for the boys, and has went to England."

The captain shook his head despairingly as he daubed a little more tar on the rigging of the life-mast.

"But he'll soon be back, eh?" suggested the poet, cheerfully.

The captain shook the poet and all the guilty four a negative. He slashed vengefully at the stay.

"We'll never see him no more," he said, hopelessly. "Pete's a good boy. Right to the core. But that there's a mighty woozy country — England, Ireland, France, and Wales!"

"Phew!" whispered Et Cætera, whose geography was at least better than that. "There is a Smithfield in England. Some one was burned there," ended Et Cætera, very terribly. "Or something?" a bit uncertainly.

The guilty poet trailed off through the deep sand to the shack of a house Pete had built for Mrs. Pete — mostly out of driftwood. And when they arrived — for they all guiltily trailed after the poet, to make him think he was less guilty because they were, too — by the process

of dilution — it seemed as if there were no guilt anywhere in the world. The desert of sand on the beach bloomed here into a garden — flowers nearly covered Pete's rough carpentry from view. A ring-neck snipe whistled cheerfully in a wooden cage, a board-yard dog leaped upon them, begging, in a language they did not understand, for a peanut to balance upon his nose, all nature smiled — where Pete had built his shack and caged The Belle of the Beach.

And Mrs. Pete was singing:

“ Sweet hour of prayer,
Sweet hour of prayer,
Thy wings shall my petition bear — ”

And when the guilty party came upon her, no prettier sight might they — or any one — wish to see! She was bowing and rising over a tub of foaming suds, lifting a garment to the light to look through it and see whether she had washed it clean. She had a touselled tow head, and a wide mouth; yes, but in it were pretty white teeth, and there were wonderful blue eyes under a fine roof of brows, while a supple young waist and trim ankles and a tucked-up skirt completed a picture of The Belle of the Beach — as they had called her when Pete won her from all the rest of the life-crew.

On the floor, tumbling, sleeping, sucking

thumbs, were four other towheads — not one of them crying, but all as busy as bees about a hive.

"Law!" smiled Mrs. Pete, when the guilty party entered, wiping her hands on her blue apron — shaking with them, smiling, without the least embarrassment.

The poet shifted from foot to foot for a moment, then said:

"Mrs. Pete, they tell me that Pete has gone away?"

"Now *who* told you?" pouted the girl, vexedly.

"The captain," said the composer.

"That's what I thought. He couldn't keep his face shut if he was a mummy!"

"Where can he be found?" asked the poet.

"Law! I dun'no'," said Mrs. Pete. "He just skipped out. I suppose that duffer has told you the whole thing?" she asked, experimentally. "Hasn't he?"

"Yi — yes," nodded the poet.

"Durn him!"

"Bib — but, Mrs. Pete," stammered the poet, "we — we sympathize — wi-with you and want to help Pete — ti — to —"

"What are you sympathizin' *fur*?" asked the puzzled Mrs. Pete.

Neither the voluble composer nor the sprightly poet had an answer ready. Dick was meditating

one, and Etc. had about got one ready, when Mrs. Pete continued.

"You want Pete to git that there money, I expect," she went on. "Well, of course you do. And you needn't think we'll be stuck up when we do git it. You 'n' us'll be just as good friends as ever. But all these livers here, these beach-combers'd be so jealous of 'im they'd rob 'im on sight. You don't have to. You're rich. Goshens — it's great *not* to take in washing!"

"Yi — yes," agreed the poet. "Bib — but what's his address in — in London?"

"Law! what do I know? I wouldn't know if he told me. He just takes all the cash he can rake and scrape and goes and gits that money. He's got about enough to git over. But, say, if he don't find that there Smith, he'll have to work it to git back. But he'll git the dough, all right. You bet he's an honest man — my Pete is. Hasn't he got your certificate to that effect? And don't you know what an honest man is? Ain't you straight yourself?"

"Why, of course Tom's honest!" said Et Cætera, hotly, whereat Mrs. Pete was sorry, and answered:

"Why, of course! That's what I said."

"Then," said the poet, "I did — don't suppose he left you much money?"

"You bet not. He goes and takes out all the

cash; I stays and"—she laughed happily—"takes in washin'!"

"Yes!" The poet at last had something to grasp. "That is what we came for. We have a lot of wash—"

"Oh, thanks!" cried Mrs. Pete, happily. "I'd rather wash for you'uns than most. I'll send Billy over for it. You and Pete's been good friends ever since—" she laughed. "What is it?"

"Si — socks," said the poet.

"Socks," nodded the composer.

"Socks," added Et Cætera. "Three pairs."

"Gee!" laughed Mrs. Pete, "nothin' but socks!"

"Shirts," said Richard, cunningly.

"Ah," said Mrs. Pete, "I just love to wash shirts. Whenever I wash Pete's I think of him. They're so full of tar and tobacco. And, you know, that's so hard to git out."

She had addressed Dick.

The poet had been fishing through his pockets and had found a dollar bill and thirty cents in change. This he was putting together on his palm. The composer, seeing, and understanding what the poet was about, found a couple of dollars and some change, which he added to the hoard upon the poet's palm. Richard contributed a new Columbian half-dollar — carried for

a pocket-piece — and even small Et Cætera found seven cents in the corner of a handkerchief. The poet passed it all to the palm of the wondering Mrs. Pete. The towheads had gathered round — the last one climbing up the leg of the next one.

“Hello, stepladder!” laughed Mrs. Pete to the towheads. “But, say, what’s all this?”

The money on her palm.

“Thi — thought we’d just pay you in advance,” said the poet. “We’ve got so much money.”

“Well, I’ll be durned!” said Mrs. Pete. “First time that ever happened to *me*! Well — will some of yous keep account? I got no head for figures.”

That was a very unhappy winter for all the happy four — and especially the poet.

And though he wrote poetry frenziedly (for there were almost no clients) in order to keep up his reputation for riches with Mrs. Pete, no one seemed to want poetry that winter. And though the composer descended to songs instead of operas, no one seemed to want to sing that winter. Indeed, the only ones who did better than usual, or better than they expected, were the small Et Cætera and Richard, who made and sold jigsaw puzzles, putting the money faithfully aside

in a milk-jar for the day they knew that Mrs. Pete would need it.

For it grew worse and worse. Pete, who should have returned in three weeks, had not come in ten — twenty. And the snow was on the ground. Instead of the flowering vines, there were icicles at the eaves of Pete's house — and little enough warmth within. It was hard to give the money from the milk-jar to the despairing but self-supporting young wife — often in bed now. Finally she began to take a little now and then — when the poet would carry it down to her — leaving it at places where he knew it would soon be found.

"It's up to me," sighed the poet, "to see her through the mischief I've made — till Pete gets back —"

"With the money," added Et Cætera, in a certain faith never quite lost.

"And if he never gets back?" asked Dick, in that way of conundrums.

"Then Tom must marry her," said Et Cætera, decisively.

"Lord!" said the poet, wiping the perspiration, though it was cold weather.

"And the whole stepladder," finished Et Cætera — and meant it.

"Lord!" whispered the poet again.

"No use for a stepladder?" laughed Dick.

"Needs a fire-escape," added Harry, grimly.

Then came The Great Blizzard — as it is known to this day — which, by the way, is not far from the day of this story. For three days the snow had fallen, the thermometer had descended, and the winds had raged. Then, when a road had been ploughed for trains — which took three days more — the poet put all the money of the happy four into his breast pocket and went to the beach.

He had said he would return — perhaps the same day. But it was fortunate that, even at the station, he had thought of adding a basket of meats and provisions to his luggage. He did not return. For when he had fought his way through the stillness to the door of Pete's house a soft wailing came through. And when he pressed on, through the panes thick with frost, peered a nosegay of small gaunt faces. Mrs. Pete's face was not among them.

She was in bed, with a very crimson infant by her side. She, too, was gaunt. The poet shrank back against the door, while the stepladder disengaged itself and crawled to the basket. Small and grimy hands made short work of the order within. Even the next-to-the-last step bit ravenously at a piece of raw meat. The poet left the basket there, with the snarling little animals

about it, and went to the bed, where the wan and voiceless body held out a hand to him.

"You see," it whispered, "we haven't been able to lay up much for the wi — winter. And I guess everybody thought we did — like when Pete was here — and let us alone — though there is no one very near. Bib — but there was nothin' in the house for two days before the blizzard, and that has been five. I couldn't send the ladder. It is too small for such weather. It would have died. I'd rather have 'em die here — with me."

And Mrs. Pete sobbed gently.

"That's what it looked like till you come. You see —"

She eloquently uncovered the newly born child. And with the woe of want on her pretty face, came also the mother-smile.

"I expect you think I'm sorry he come — it's a boy — when there was trouble enough. But I'm not!"

She madly kissed the child, and, Heaven help him, the poet did too, and helped with the crying.

The mother pointed to where the ladder devoured the raw contents of the basket. "I expect He sends you everything you ast for. I expect you're real good!"

"Yes," lied the poet, choking in his throat, "I have about everything I want. And —"

He looked about and saw the new baby, swaddled in unmade linings of Pete's old coats, the neglected ladder, clothed in the rest of Pete's old garments — the unswept corners — the whole air of dejection — then he finished what he meant to say:

"And I'm going to see that you get everything *you* want —"

Then, noting the hope it brought to the wan face on the bed, he went one better — "And something besides!"

So cheered was Mrs. Pete that she said:

"I wish I had some mashed potatoes! Coffee! Oh, I wasn't hungry till you come! I was just starving easy."

Well, the poet never succeeded in getting her everything she wanted. Perhaps even a wiser and richer poet than he might not have done so. But he got her the coffee and potatoes then and there — though it was a close shave. For the coffee had to be rescued from a portion of the stepladder, and each potato had been gnawed by small ravenous teeth.

Harry got a telegram to hurry down too. And, of course, Richard and Et Cætera went along. They were exhorted in the wire to bring a bunch of medicines of a rather strange nature, and the poet had added in explanation:

"Baby."

Then he had further added:

"Potatoes! Coffee! Coal-oil!"

Of course no one could know precisely what such a telegram might mean. But the brief Et Cætera said:

"I'd take lots of potatoes and coffee along. And some coal-oil. I saw that they had an oil-stove. And they always had mashed potatoes and coffee — and babies — all together — when I was there."

"Baby — coffee — coal-oil! How *does* he mix them?" mused Dick.

They found the poet washing the dishes. He had cooked the dinner. He had attended the little towheads. And there in the bed poor little Mrs. Pete, wan and big-eyed. All was soon explained by the poet, the ladder, and the surroundings. Mrs. Pete said nothing — only holding out a hand. She was better. But she soon let them know that there was little comfort in living without Pete.

"He has been here when every baby but this one was born. And I'm going to name it after him. Little Pete. Yes, that's his name."

She looked pensively seaward.

"I might as well put the crape on the door," she added then. "Look there!"

At last there seemed news of Pete. She

handed Richard a newspaper in which a wreck in the icy sea was told about. Among the names of the dead was one Peter Puttersson.

"But there must be many Peter Putterssons in the world," comforted Richard.

"That's *my* Pete, all right, all right," sobbed the girl. "I may as well send for Ram."

Ram was the undertaker from the main.

"Don't tell me there's another woman," cried Mrs. Pete, suddenly, out of a dry silence.

"Poor devil!" whispered the grimy poet to the other three. "That, too!" To Mrs. Pete he said, stoutly: "Of course there is no other woman. The idea! Pete couldn't—"

"Not on your life!" cried Dick, adding to the general security of an unaccustomed allowance of slang.

"Just look! You all have that faith in him like it could move a sand-hill! And me—I—I've doubted him! My Pete! Oh, I've just laid here and seen him with one of them there English or Scotch lassies—hair yellower 'n mine. Clothes tucked up like these here summer ladies in their bathing-suits. Why, I've *heard* him tell her—or them—for it's not always the same person—I've heard him admire dark hair!—how he loved 'em—while he's crossin' a stream with 'em on a log—holdin'—on—ri—round the waist—so's they can't fall off the log!

Who'd want to fall off a log when my Pete's arm was round 'em!"

"Nonsense!" cried the lachrymose poet, not entirely opportunely.

"Nonsense?" cried Mrs. Pete, misunderstanding the poet entirely and relapsing into her unfaith; "if you'd ever loved my Pete, you'd know how fascinatin' he is with women. And them there milkmaids and shepherdesses I sees in books—"

She broke down completely and could go no further.

And Dick, dropping tears all over the pretty face, bent and said:

"Why, you lovely little goose, there is not one of them to compare with you! There are no such blue eyes anywhere! There will be no such peachy cheeks ditto — when they chirk up a bit and grow more plump! Cheer up! Be ready to bloom for him the moment he comes! For he *will* come! And the moment may be very near!"

"Yes," chimed in the chorus, variously, "the moment may be very near! Look out!"

"Say—I believe you," cried the lady Pete. "Bring me that lookin'-glass!"

And is not this the sign of renewed life to any woman—to ask for her mirror?

"There's a fresh nightie there," suggested

Mrs. Pete, pointing to a curtain draped from nails against the wall. "I kep' it to have the baby in — but Pete wasn't here and it didn't matter. Now I'll wear it to — to welcome him home in."

And while the guests turned their backs Mrs. Pete got into the pretty, fresh nightie; then:

"Why — my God!" she cried. "Why do I do this — as if he was comin' right in!"

And she would have torn the garment off, regardless of all present, if all present had not joined in preventing the catastrophe.

"It's bad luck!" she persisted. "Now I know he's dead!"

"Listen, you gilly," cried the savage Et Cætera. "It's *good* luck. Don't you know it's expecting — wishing for things — which makes them happen? Once I wished for a *bite* of fudge — and a whole box came in the next mail!"

That night they all slept in the driftwood house of one room which Pete had built for his bride when she was called "The Belle of the Beach."

The blizzard continued all the night — growing worse toward morning. Then they knew that there was trouble at the life-station, not far away, for, first, there was the sound of a gun at sea; then that of the gun with which the guards fired the life-line.

The poet and the composer ran to the beach,

leaving Richard and Et Cætera to take care of Mrs. Pete and the stepladder. They could hear the shouting through the storm and still another shot from the station gun. Then for a while there was quiet — until Richard and Et Cætera heard the measured tread of men carrying something.

Both the poet and the composer were armored in glittering ice, and the thing they carried between them had on its armor.

Richard blocked the door bodily so that the sick girl might not see. Et Cætera put the stepladder under the bed. But so far as Mrs. Pete was concerned it was useless.

"It's my Pete, all right," she sobbed. "Let 'em in."

It was her Pete, all right. They brought him in and, when Mrs. Pete had got out of it, they put him on the bed. He seemed very cold — frozen — and quite dead.

Dick and Et Cætera had acted promptly. Cracking the icy armor, first they dragged off Pete's clothing, while the poet and the composer, leaving theirs to melt away, made hot toddy out of the bit of whiskey Dick had smuggled through the lines of the great blizzard.

Now, the composer had some skill in medicine — not as much as he supposed he had, but enough to tell him, after a moment with Pete's pulse, that

he wasn't dead at all — though he might be if, as Et Cætera suggested, he wasn't promptly pumped up. This he and the poet proceeded to do, while Richard and Et Cætera held the step-ladder and Mrs. Pete dealt out the precious toddy in very small spoonfuls. But he was well frozen, as Et Cætera remarked afterward, and the process was slow.

When they finally brought Pete around the first thing he did was to clap both his hands to his middle as if something hurt him there.

"It's all right, Pete," said the composer.

Pete, still not quite recovered, eyed them suspiciously.

"I dun'no'," he said. "But it's there, and you bet it'll stay. If it stays through such a storm as that there, it'll stay if you're thieves. Where's Mrs. Pete?"

That lady, now almost recovered from her illness with the joy — which we all know is highly therapeutic — threw herself upon Pete.

"Oh, Pete — my Pete! No crape on the door — no Ram! — no —"

With a sudden mad joy she bent close and whispered:

"I don't care — Pete, I don't care — if there was a milkmaid — or a shepherdess — a dozen of 'em! I've got you now. And I'll keep you — yes, ag'inst the bunch of 'em!"

"Milkmaid? — shepherdess?" queried Pete, dully, letting his arms go round her, "what are they?"

And Mrs. Pete turned to the four — crying out madly:

"There! Hear that! There *was* none — there was no milkmaid — no shepherdess — he dun'no' what they are! And he'd know if they was. They was none. What did I tell you!"

Such are women — God bless 'em! Such is love — God bless it!

But even in his semi-consciousness Pete still searched about his middle, with watchful eyes on all about.

"Hah! She's like the Star-spangled Banner!" he announced, finally.

"Why is she like the Star-spangled Banner?" asked Dick, thinking that Pete referred to some lady.

"Because she's still *there!*" answered Pete.

Then Pete unstrapped a thick leather belt from his waist and handed it to Mrs. Pete.

"It's yourn," he said. "See if it's dry — all right. Look out for these here people. If they rush you, shoot."

"Oh, Pete," said Mrs. Pete, "they are all friends — and all have been that kind to me! Look — this is Mr.—"

"Sure!" cried Pete then, recognizing in turn the happy four. "Well, then, let's open up and show 'em! They'll be as glad as us!"

The guilty poet, having also once been in the leather business, knew what such belts were for, and began to suspect this one. So he at once assisted Pete's injunction to open up, and soon was spreading upon the table note after note of the Bank of England. They were damp, yes, but good as gold.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Pete, when she saw the interest of every one else in it.

"Money!" shouted the happy Pete, rising up in bed, sick no more.

"Money?" wondered Mrs. Pete, who had never seen anything but greenbacks.

"Thirty millions!" yelled Pete, hugging her, and extracting one of the notes (which had fluttered to the floor) from the mouth of the next-to-the-last step of the ladder.

"I told you so," whispered Et Cætera — which wasn't quite accurate.

"Ni — ni — not thirty millions!" gasped the dizzy poet, to whom such sums were beyond any arithmetic.

"Well, not exactly thirty millions, of course," conceded Pete, while the happy four gaped speechlessly; "we don't want that much, do we, Piggy? But it's enough, enough, all right. You

see, they was about fifty Smiths in that there town of Smithfield —”

“Yi — you don’t mean to si — say that yi — you found it — si — such a ti — town?” gasped the poet.

“Well, what do you think I am?” demanded Pete, imperially, “to go after a town — a whole burg — and not find it? You bet you! Well, as I was tooting, they was about fifty Smiths in that there town. And by the time I begun to git around I was pretty well advertised and they begun to pity me.”

“You really found a Smith who was a smith?” asked Richard.

“Thirteen of ’em,” said Pete. “And they all renigged but the last one. And he was a has-been.”

“A what?” asked the composer, to whom such things as slang did not come happily.

“A has-been — *was* a smith, but got too gildy to keep it up. Gee! If a man’s a smith over there he’s always a smith. He’s as proud of it as we are of being loafers. Well, when I gets to the unlucky thirteenth, ‘Here’s where I git it in the Hoosack,’ says I. It’s thirteen. And when I first puts it up to the guy he says, says he, ‘So you’re the Honest Man from Hameriky?’ — that’s what the newspapers took to calling me — and bloomin’ crank — pokin’ fun all the time.

Also, they tells about all the Smiths — in fun — sort of comic family tree — that's the way I learns about this here pertic'lar Smith — which he is called the richest and most liberal — and ex-centrick — having a 'sylum for one-legged cripples — where they kin git wooden legs free — and a whole county for crippled children to roam about in.

“ ‘ You cawn't make me beli've, sir, that ye coom hall the way hover 'ere to — ’

“ ‘ You bet you I did,’ says I, ‘ and I'm a-gon to git it or know the reason why! You ain't a-gon to escape me without the newspapers gitting it. And I'll tell *you* that if the yellows in the Land of the Brave and the Home of the Free once gits after you, it's all over with you. So you'd better make good! ’

“ ‘ Now you don't soy? ’ he says, laughin' like he'd bust. ‘ Hi didn't fawncy there was an honest man hover there! ’

“ ‘ They's one or two more,’ says I, ‘ but I got the call on 'em all because I found it first.’

“ ‘ Found hwhat? ’ says he — like he'd never heard of that will — and I ups and tells him. Tells him the whole A, B, C, X, Y, Z, of it.

“ Well, such a laugh as he broke out you never heard.

“ ‘ What hlanguage is that you speak? ’ says he.

“ ‘Hamerican, be gosh!’ says I, imitatin’ him real good.

“ ‘He laughs some more — really enjoyin’ himself.

“ ‘So you’re honest?’ says he.

“ ‘You bet you,’ says I. ‘Honester as you.’

“ ‘Why, sir,’ says he — and his whiskers, which he wears under his chin like a rooster wears his when he molts, bristled.

“ ‘Aw,’ says I, ‘because you’re a-practisin’ false pertences.’

“ ‘And how’s that, sir?’ says he, still enjoyin’ hisself.

“ ‘Because you’re alive when you says you’re dead,’ I ups and tells him — which of course he knows — and laughs like he was eatin’ up every word.

“ ‘Well, say, he’s about the gamest old sport I ever see! He tells me that a will’s no good until a man is dead — and he ain’t dead — not yet — and henceforth he ain’t compelled to obey that will; and I fell down, down, down, until I thunk I’m about the middle of the earth. For that there’s so. It’s common sense. ‘Well,’ says I, ‘how’m I to git back to Mrs. Pete and the step-ladder?’ And I had to explain that *there* to ’im — them Englishmen’s brains *is* slow — but sure. ‘Oh!’ he says then. And mebby he’ll help me out a bit, so’s I kin git home, and a little on the

side — not thirty millions — and to wait till he's dead — and he'll not forgit me then — if I don't forgit him — as you bet you I won't.

“ ‘ Well, young man,’ he says, ‘ hif you’ll come ’ere to-morrow, at three precoisely, I will give you — not hexactly thirty millions — but henough to make you thankful that you *are* an honest man — as I believe you are — and I’ll ask you to fulfill the terms of this instrument by erecting the said monument to me upon my demise,’ an’ he laughed — an’ laughed an’ laughed, meanin’ the will.

“ Well, you bet you I was there, in the front hall, when the town clock struck three. And, on the minute, the footman, all gold up his front and down his back, took me to the nice old gent with the ruff of faded spinage. Well, he counted money till I got tired — and didn’t care when he stopped.

“ Then he says good-by, and he says, says he: ‘ Thank the gent who sent you to me — with a certificate of honesty. He has done better than he, perhaps, thought.’

“ Say, what did he mean? And who? You? ”

“ Not me, I suppose,” faltered the poet.

“ Well, you gev’ me the cert! ” declared Pete, shaking his head in a mystification which was never to be resolved.

" Anyhow," Pete went on, " he ladles out that there mon! "

" And ten minutes later I was at the dock. Well, the only thing I found there, going my way, was that there schooner out there in the surf. She was rotten — any one could see that — being built in eighteen-one.

" ' Matey,' says I, ' want an able bodied seaman? '

" Lord! They looked at me like I was crazy, and then grabbed me with both hands — and I'm off for Mrs. Pete and the ladder — and yous. But the bloomin' lubbers — I got that word over there — all abandoned ship in the night, at Lewes, takin' all the boats, and leavin' me aboard dreamin' of Mrs. Pete and the ladder, bein' played out by my watch in the storm. When I woke — well, you know what's been going on in the weather line for a week — the ship and I were alone on the ocean, and I had to stay or go overboard — which I made up my mind I'd put off as long as possible — thinkin', mebbby, the way the storm lay, we might drive along here, and the boys at station ninety-one might be expectin' me.

" Well, they was. But, you bet you, I done some tall prayin' to git 'em there, and to git the ship there. Say, the Lord's a mighty good sort,

you bet you! He 'don't pass you by once unless you've passed him by often."

And each of the happy four said Amen!

"Say," said Pete at last, "how much does the old woman owe you?"

"Ni — nothing!" gasped the poet.

"Nothing? Come off! How much? I pay my own debts and her'n too!"

Pete was handling the notes of the Bank of England like street-car transfers.

"Not a cent!" said the composer.

"Et Cætera, how much? Don't *you* be a liar, too," adjured Pete, waving the whole bunch of notes.

"I — I don't know," stammered Et Cætera, dazedly. For the impossible treasure-ship had come in at last.

"Mrs. Pete," began Richard, "if you please —"

"How *much?*" shouted Pete, terribly. "Do you suppose I can't pay? I'm as rich as you!"

"Yes," sighed the poet.

"Will this do?" asked Pete. "Then, this?"

He tried to thrust two of the bills into the pocket of the poet.

"Please take it," smiled the little wife.

"What you done can't be paid at all in money. But —"

She began to cry into her apron at the recollec-

tion of it, and the top step of the ladder commanded reproachfully:

"Pleath!"

Whereupon the guilty poet took the note.

"Oh, I forgot!" cried Mrs. Pete. What she had forgotten was to facilitate the acquaintance of Pete with his lastborn. She brought him and put him into Pete's arms — with dramatic suddenness.

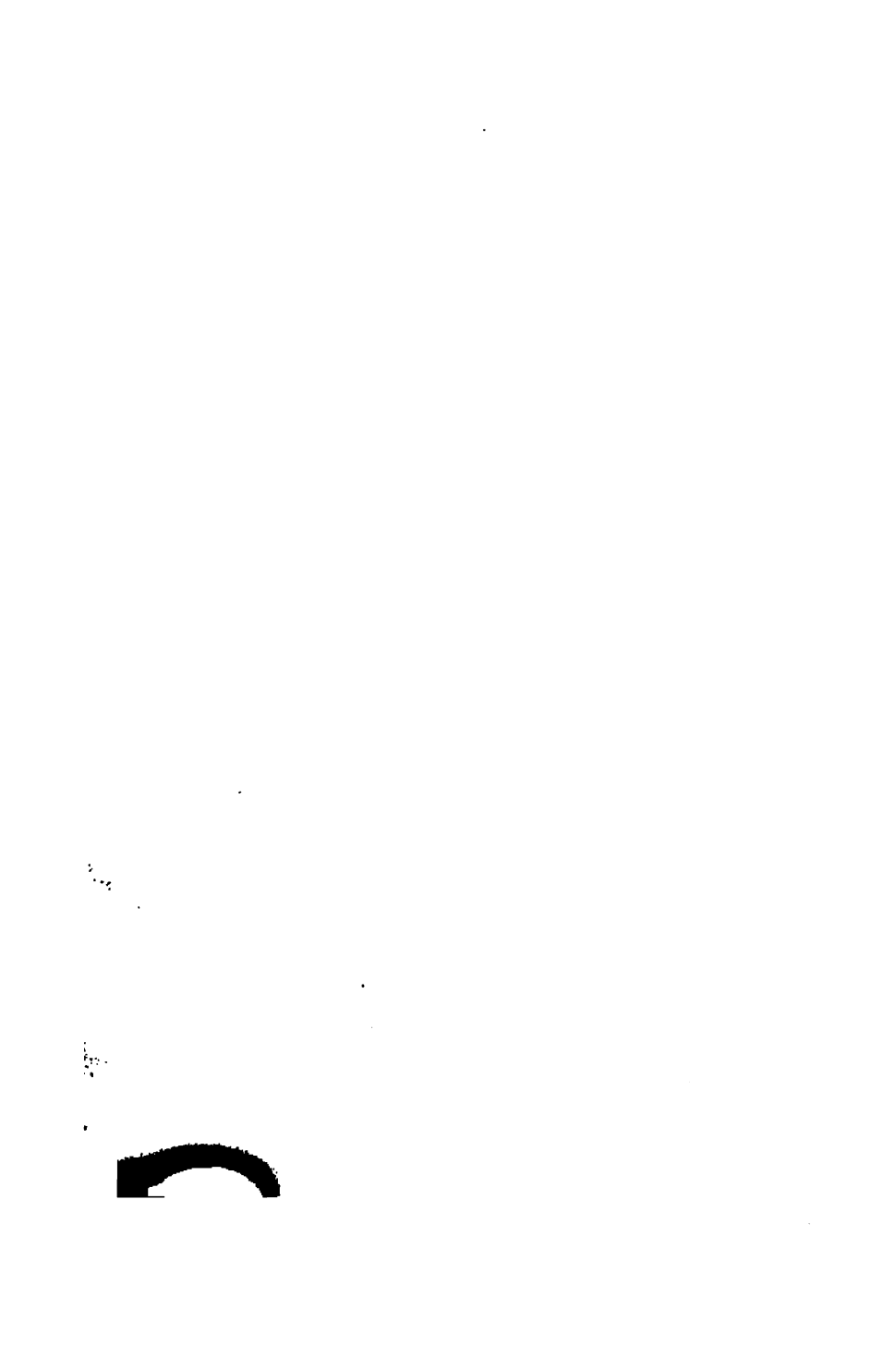
And Pete gathered Mrs. Pete and the latest step of the ladder, and as many other steps as could crowd in, to his arms — and nothing more needed to be said.

And there was a great feast in the little driftwood house that night yet — of coffee and mashed potatoes.



SPILLED MILK





I — THE RUINS OF 'EM

BEHIND the curtain — just down on their "Castles in Spain" — Ben and Penelope waited breathlessly for a recall, hoping for many.

Bass, the owner and manager of The Varieties, came from the front.

"It's only a few of our own people," said he, concerning the feeble applause. "There isn't a hand for you. The curtain cannot go up. Sorry."

"Oh," begged Pen, desperately, starting toward the man whose finger was on the electric button, "if it were nursed a bit —"

"If you go out on that you will be hissed," warned Bass. "Listen!"

It was the fatal contented chatter of the audience.

"Nursed a bit!" snorted Bass.

Pen half sobbed: "Bu-but wait — a moment more!"

The manager drew out his watch.

"It is half a minute longer than I ever wait. Strike!" The stage hands moved and "Castles in Spain" fell in ruins about them. Bass stepped before the curtain.

The audience gave him "the glad hand" denied to "Castles in Spain."

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "'Castles in Spain' is withdrawn. Something that you will like has been substituted for to-morrow night."

Then the applause Ben and Pen had waited for in vain did break out.

"They're satisfied to lose C. I. S.," said Bass.

Pen choked dismally in her throat. Ben gripped her hand.

"Have you anything to put on in its place?" asked Bass. "I have faith in you yet — if the people haven't."

Ben halted a moment; then he bravely said: "No!"

"Well, then," said Bass, "after three failures this engagement had better close."

"Yes," said Ben, with dignity.

"Keep the costumes. That's my own little venture in 'Castles in Spain.'"

"Thank you, and good-night," said Ben, tucking Pen — who trembled now — under his arm, with royal nonchalance.

"Look here — I like people who fail as you do. You will get there yet."

Bass was following them to their dressing-rooms.

"Go after that prize; but get something new.

The ending was too weak to get the curtain up again."

"Oh — a prize!" said Ben in disdain.

"Young man," said the manager, severely, "when I was your age — and in your circumstances — five thousand dollars seemed about the size of a twenty-story office building."

Pen wishing to retrieve Ben's gaucherie, said:

"Of course we will try for the prize, Mr. Bass — thank you."

"There is one thing," said Ben, at the door of Pen's little room, "without which an unsuccessful actress-playwright cannot do — sleep. Go for it. Not a word about 'C. I. S.' " He kissed her there in the door.

"And you will?"

"Sure!" said Ben, almost gaily. "I am that next worst thing to an unsuccessful actress-playwright — an unsuccessful actor-playwright."

"Th-then *I will!*" sobbed Pen, with tremendous determination.

II — NEITHER STAGE TEARS NOR STAGE EGGS

BUT the next morning, as they met at breakfast, each knew that the other had not slept. And, presently, Pen's ever-ready tears fell into her plate.

"Stop it, Pen," said Ben, "unless they are stage tears. These are *not* stage eggs."

Pen held up a damp handkerchief — soiled a trifle with make-up, some of which remained from the fatal last night.

"Pen," said Ben again, "remember that you promised Bass to go in for that prize!"

"Don't, Ben," she begged.

"I have spent a night going in for it — and you know I don't do that lightly. Bass was sensible."

"Oh, Ben, he is a brute!"

"He is a manager. Listen!"

He read again the advertisement which he had risen in the night to find:

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS — comedy sketch — thirty minutes — two, three or four persons — play to be the property of the author — three weeks' engagement guaranteed — three hundred a week.

"It is a great offer. Bass is all right. No wonder I have spent the night in the midst of temptations."

It offered no temptation to Penelope. At that moment nothing could.

Ben rose suddenly.

"How much money have you?"

"There is my purse," mourned Pen, pointing to her dressing bureau.

"Ha, ha!" laughed Ben when he had emptied it, "a dollar eighty-some. And I have—"

He turned out all of his pockets.

"—about two. It will be enough."

Through the telephone he learned that they could have what the liveryman called a "rig" for a dollar an hour.

"But you surely don't mean to go pleasure driving on our last cent?" cried Pen.

"No. Get on your pretties. We are going to get our new rural play."

"What? Where?" asked Pen.

"In the real country — where there are farmers and milkmaids — I got a milkmaid into my head last night."

"Oh, what do we children of the city know about farms?"

"That is just what we are going to do with our last cent — make the intimate personal acquaintance of a farm."

"Can't we take the train or the trolley? It is cheaper."

"No. There are no real farms where trains and trolleys go. There they are always dressed up and sitting on their front porches — to take in strangers. I am going for the rig — to save a tip."

He kissed her and went.



III — CLOTHES — PAILS — RAKE — FORK

THEY saw many things on the ways they cunningly chose — those which led into the woods — and where the roads were damp — and earthy-smelling — and little worn. But it seemed more and more true, as they went on, that their minds were not formed for the country. For, at evening, there was not an idea in either head.

Nevertheless, Pen reclined happily upon Ben, in the sort of spirit which comes with rest in the afternoon.

“Whether we find the play or not,” she murmured, sleepily, “I shall not regret that we spent our last cent for this. It is lovely. Do you think the poor horse will last to get us back?”

For the animal gave evidence of dissatisfaction.

“Yes, Pen, dear,” laughed Ben. “He is an actor, too. He has been taught not to disclose all he can do — for fear that he will be made to do it. It is lovely. I think God really made the country and scene painters the city.”

Pen went back anxiously to the other thing:

"The sun will soon set. Do you know the way back?"

"Not an inch of it. But the horse does. We might go to sleep after we turn him homeward, and he will smell his oats away off here and go straight toward them."


"It isn't possible!" wondered Pen, believing him.

"The oats! I'm not sure. And I don't care if we never get home again —"

Then he shocked her into uprightness.

"Sh! There it is — sure! It always comes when one isn't looking. Right under our noses — the play — the costumes — the properties — the scenery — the five thousand!"

What Pen saw was a girl climbing the steps of a stile. Then she passed, singing, away through a newly-mown field dotted with cocks of hay, toward a young farmer, who raked and also sang. The scene was backed by a fringe of tall old trees along the line of the western fence, and through these, as through a large-meshed veil, the setting sun poured his red. The girl had a milk pail in each hand. Her sleeves were rolled up over a pair of arms which Amphitrite might have envied, her dress was turned up in front and pinned in a cascade, showing a faded yellow skirt beneath. Her ankles were in trim thick woollen stockings, which in their turn were thrust into



soft old Oxfords out of which the heeling had been cut for ease. Her hair was sunburned into several shades of red, which quite matched her round, tanned, freckled face.

The sun was in the milkmaid's eyes so that she couldn't see them, while they saw her all the better for that reason. The young farmer, as they supposed, in the course of his work disappeared behind a haystack. But in a moment they knew better. As the girl passed, he leaped out and kissed her.

"Ho!" almost shouted Ben, "a situation!"

"She is at his mercy," agreed Pen.

"But he is bound to have his way," laughed Ben.

"Of course! On account of the milk. If she did not save it, fancy what would happen to her at home."

The next scene puzzled them a trifle. The struggles — the anger — of the girl subsided suddenly, and they started directly toward Ben and Pen, an arm about each, a milk pail in possession of each.

"Well," said Ben, dubiously, "that coup vanquished her and she gives up. That is the way with women."

"Is it?" asked Pen, dreamily; "so soon?"

"You know there is no such thing as time on the stage."

"But in a hayfield?" she laughed. "Ben, dear, this is real life!"

"So it is," agreed Ben. "It fooled me for a moment! It is good stuff for us since it fooled *me!*"

"Ben," whispered Pen, in awe, "I really believe we have the whole thing."

"No," said Ben, critically, "only about the last half — the best half. The grand climax. Perhaps 'the after.' But, having that, the rest will come. We simply work back to the beginning. And, even if it doesn't — what does Bass care about the beginning if the ending is all right and brings the curtain down and up. And this ending is simply perfect. Back — back! Exit Right upper entrance!"

This was to the horse — which he backed behind the cider press. Then he whispered, tragically:

"Pen!"

"What?" she whispered back, as tragically.

"Their clothes!"

"Heavens!" agreed Pen.

"Properties! Pails! Rake! Fork! Everything!"

"But — oh — the *money?*"

For an instant Ben went into thought.

"Trade!"

"Trade?" from wondering Pen.

"She will jump at those pretty clothes of yours!"

Pen took a moment to get back her breath.

"But they are all I have!"

"What does that matter?"

"I can't go down to breakfast in a milkmaid costume."

"Eat it in your room."

"Twenty-five cents extra!" said Pen.

"Five thousand to pay it with."

"Well? —"

"And you won't need any other clothes, for we are going to put in every minute for some time in your room writing this play. You can do it all the better in costume. After that is done you will have all the clothes — all the money — you want — oh!"

It was a still more tragic whisper.

"We won't go home till after dark. Then I can get *his* clothes, too!"

IV — SILKEN LININGS

THE young milkmaid and her farmer were upon them, and Ben got hastily down.

“Look here, we’d like to have your clothes!” cried Ben.

And he answered the horrified recoil of the young couple with worse:

“And your rake — and fork — and pails —”

Pen, who had clambered from the rig, here interposed her diplomacy:

“You see, my brother and I have taken a great fancy to your costumes and — and — we would li-like to b-buy” — the word was extremely hard to articulate — “buy them — or, if you prefer” — it went very smoothly now — “we will exchange costumes with you. Mine is really a very good walking suit — tailored — silk lined —” Pen raised the hem to show the lining. “The buttons are real jet.

“My brother’s” — at the word the other two seemed to start for the second time — “coat has the new gorge — and the straighter back — please show him the lining, Ben, dear — while the trousers have the new and less extravagant peg

bottoms — the wide side-cord. You know it is the smartest thing, now, to have a different waist-coat —”

“Excuse us,” said the young farmer, with an awkward bow.

“Excuse us,” said the little milkmaid, with a quaint courtesy, as they turned together to consider the offer. He laughed and seemed to urge it. She shook her head from the very beginning.

At the same time Ben whispered to Pen:

“Excuse *us*. All the same he’s telling her how stunning she will look in your clothes. And she will. Why don’t she say ‘yes’ and be done with it?”

Then Ben saw that his sister was paying no attention to him.

“What are you looking at?”

“Oh! She’s just my figure. And I think he’s about yours, Ben, dear.”

“They’re sizing us up, too,” laughed Ben. “Hang him!”

“Ben,” chided his sister, “he’s extremely handsome.”

“Never you mind. I’ll get that complexion if there’s virtue in stain and paint, and that hair if wigs are still made, next September. Then, if I’m not as good-looking as he is I’ll eat my hat — and I’m not fond of my hat.”

“He’s a trifle bigger than you, Ben, dear. I

wonder if freckles *can* be painted? I never heard of it. But I'll have them! And those streaks of sunburn in her hair! I can't get her eyes, I suppose. They are blue!"

"Just like forget-me-nots," laughed happy Ben.

"Poor little thing! Look, Ben! She has spilled all her milk!"

Ben stole a look.

"That's the way with women," laughed Ben, pinching Pen surreptitiously. "After saving it at such a frightful cost, she spills it when she might have kept it at no cost at all. Stones in the pails! What *will* her mother say!"

At this moment the young farmer spoke up:

"My sister and I cannot agree —"

"Oh! Your *sister!*" cried Ben, an inscrutable happiness within. "It's fine to be — only brother and sister."

And Pen had suddenly the same sort of happiness, so that her eyes met those of her brother with a certain comradeship of guilt. "Yes!" she agreed.

Ben rattled happily on:

"Isn't that queer? Why, we are only brother and sister, too! We are stage people."

"Oh," cried the other two together, with the immediate interest country people have in those habitants of the fairy land behind the curtain.

"Please excuse us," begged the awkward farmer again.

"Please excuse us," said his sister with the same pretty courtesy, and they whispered together again.

And again Ben whispered to Pen:

"Let's stay. The sun is down. And if we are nice to them — very nice — I think they will be — er — nice to us — in the matter —"

"Of clothes?" questioned Pen, archly.

"Yes — oh, yes — clothes — nothing but," averred Ben, with the haste now of clear guilt. "We'll just hang up the question until we are all —"

"Better acquainted?" queried Pen again. "I don't mind — not at all."

"Pen, dear old girl, you could make a graven image adore you in ten minutes — and I will give you twenty — to get his clothes for me," said Ben, "though it's highly immoral, of course."

Thus adjured, Pen plunged:

"You see, old Bass — he's the owner and manager of The Varieties — has offered a prize for a play, and we are going to win it. The fact is that we need it badly."

"Oh!" cried the milkmaid, sympathetically.

Encouraged by this, Pen went on, with not a bit of the diplomacy for which she called herself famous:

"We came to the country to get our play, and you have given it to us entirely —"

"No, only the ending," corrected happy Ben. "We don't want to owe you too much."

"And, if you would exchange clothes with us — and the pails and rakes — and so on — why we would have costumes and properties and —"

Though by this time Pen had her arms about the milkmaid, she did not immediately succumb.

"I don't blame you, dear. I wouldn't give them up if they were mine," she ended. "Everything is too lovely to give anything up!"

"Pen!" laughed the happy Ben, in warning.

Pen's suppressed diplomacy returned at once.

"My name is Penelope — and Ben's is Benjamin — Mott. On the stage we are known as 'The Two Motts.' You know," she ran on very sweetly, and insidiously now, "that is the way these little vaudeville companies are made up — a couple of brothers or sisters — or a brother and sister —"



V — THE SPLENDID REWARD OF GUILE

THOUGH she began this explanation to the milkmaid, she found herself ending it to the young farmer. This arrangement had been expedited by happy Ben, who persisted in making other explanations to the milkmaid. So that presently, abandoning the pails and the rake and the pitchfork, they were walking, two and two, under the irregular arch of some old trees, always explaining.

And the conclusion of the matter, so far as Ben was concerned, was contained in these valedictory words:

“ I shall want the pails, too — ”

“ For your sister — of course ? ”

“ Y-yes,” stammered Ben, then, gallantly, “ but I shall not forget that you wore them.”

And he sighed, indeed, like a furnace.

Pen’s valedictory was this:

“ I shall want the hay fork and the rake.”


“ Yes — excuse me,” said the young farmer, surreptitiously closing the neck of his shirt over the sunburn.

"I wish we could take the hay! Isn't it delicious?"

"It gits musty in the Winter."

Their insidious plotting got its complete reward. The clothes, the pails, the fork and rake had been yielded, and there was no further necessity for them to stay. Yet they did not go. And Pen continued to be sweet to the young farmer, who said "git," and Ben continued his entertainment of the young milkmaid, who continued to say "Excuse me." The reason for their staying was slight. They discovered that they knew some old-fashioned songs together, which Ben and Pen had learned on the stage and which the young farm people confessed that they had learned from an old song-book which appeared to be an heirloom of their house. They sang these, the more artful two teaching the more artless two, though this was scarcely an excuse for their parading arm in arm under those trees which sifted the moonlight down upon them until midnight. It was only at that hour, when a slight embarrassment of the farmer people advised the people from the city that they might perhaps have some difficulty with their parents, that they from the city departed.

But not before the two sisters had gone to one part of the wood and the two brothers to another, making certain mysterious signs, one to another,



where the contracted exchange of garments were made.

The two who sat now on the rustic bench under the trees in the smart garments of the city said one to another:

"It *is* silk lined! Poor thing."

"It *has* the new gorge! Poor chap."

"Where shall we get others?"

"Never mind."

"Weren't they sweet to us?"

"One can't give sweetness without getting some — more, usually. So that we must have been sweet to them."

"Well — *I* meant to be."

"*I* couldn't help it!"

"I pitied them so!"

"It was worse than that with me!"

"Oh! What?"

"Well — what is worse than pity?"

"Impossible!"

"That's what the Egyptians said about Moses' miracles."


"All in one night?"

"All in one minute!"

"But, isn't it awful — awful! What can we do?"

"First, hunt some other clothes. We can't run a farm in these. Ha, ha!"

"But the other thing — the worse than pity?"



"That will take care of itself — it always does?"

"I'm afraid it will not."

"Afraid? What? You, too?"

"Nonsense!"

"When I see you in those clothes I shall think you —"

"Her! And when I see you in that silk-lined coat I shall see him!"

"It is funny. This change of clothes seems to have changed our identities."

"Funny — but interesting — very."

The two in the farmer-clothes and the buggy said:

"Well, we did them out of their clothes."

"Nonsense! They were glad to give them."

"Glad to get ours, you mean."

"Ben, I'm surprised at you!"

"Why?"

"They never thought of such a thing. They were just nice to us."

"Well, we were nice to them — at least you were."

"Not so nice as they were."

"Did you dream that it was so late?"

"No, but I am now forcibly reminded of it by the lack of one thing."

"What?"

"Food."

"Oh, I am, too. But what's the use? We haven't a cent. We can't eat!"

"Hunger never waits on money."

"Ours does — must. And the horse —"

"The horse! It is at least ten hours. Is he run down?"

"Don't care. We have *had* this."

"Anyhow, he ate a lot of their grass."

"If they kick —"

"It."

"The horse people. Livery stable."

"Oh! You still have your watch."

"Girl, we have our play! Costumes — scenery — props! And old Bass' five thousand! Who cares after a night like this! Pen, dear old fellow, let me kiss you!"

"Excuse me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh! Benjamin Mott!"

"Do you know that I think we got something besides the play."

"Heavens! Something contagious?"

"U-hu! As measles!"

"What?"

"Love."

"Aha, ha, ha!"

"Very well! You'll see. Clothes which other people wear make one *like* the people who wore them before."

"Ho! — that's what actors say."

"That lovely girl's clothes make me love her."

Ben reiterated his sigh.

"And I feel like a perfect sister to that handsome farmer. Don't you feel funny about that girl?"

"She's nothing like what I thought milkmaids were on their native heath. She's smart — intelligent — and what a voice!"

"Oh! Benjamin Mott!"

"Do you think I was too br-brotherly on short acquaintance?"

"Yes — entirely."

"Will you explain — that there's no such thing as time on the stage — and that — one gets used — will you explain when we see them again?"

"See them again?"

"Yes."

"Who will do my explaining?"

"What? About time?"

"Yes."

"Pen! You little — did you — w-were you? —"


"Well — I did and I was — but no more than you."

"Phew! We'd better let explaining alone and not see them any more if you —"

"Why? You too!"

But this came from where Pen had fallen happily asleep on his shoulder.

There was trouble at that livery stable when, at daybreak, the horse which had been rented to a couple of smart city people some twenty hours before for three hours staggered into the door with two sleeping farmers. And if Ben's watch took part in the explanations — why — no one was happier than Ben to have it so.



VI — FARMERS

IT was not as easy — working back from that ideal ending — as they had fondly hoped it would be. They went to the country again for fresh inspiration.

“ Besides,” mourned Pen, “ we don’t know their names or a single thing about them. They absorbed all — ”

“ That the diplomatic Penelope shed — ”

“ — about us and didn’t tell us a thing.”

“ Does the influence of the clothing continue? ”

“ Yes. It does.”

“ I wonder if it works the same at both ends? ”

“ Certainly. The proverb says it does! ”

“ That’s rather dreadful! ”

They couldn’t find the place — not even the unworn road. Here it might be explained that, in the surety of their triumph over Bass, they were perfectly reckless of their jewelry, and paid the interest upon loans already made with other loans, so that, but for Bass’ five thousand dollars, presently, they would be hopelessly bankrupt.

“ After we’ve got the prize good and safe in bank,” said Ben, “ we’ll pay up, then hunt them and divide with them. They deserve half of it.

They furnished half the play. But it's too expensive to hunt them now."

"We'll drive out in our automobile," mused Pen.

"All over the county," shouted Ben, "and thank you for the suggestion, dear old one. It *shall* be an auto!"

Pen had something even better.

"I suppose the poor things have never been off the farm, certainly not to a theatre. So, after it is going well, but while we are still full of enthusiasm for it, say about the third night, we will give them a box."

"Hip — hip!" shouted Ben. "And a dinner afterward."

"Ben, dear, you are the very loveliest brother —"

"Who ever had a lovelier sister!"

"I bet she will wear my silk-lined skirt," laughed Pen, with her eyes full of tears.

VII — WHERE THE MILK WAS SPILLED

THE play was in private dress rehearsal — the third. A turned-over chair in Pen's hall-room was the stile; some cushions, of red and green respectively, from her cozy corner were the haycocks. Two clothes-poles with the clothing on them, placed before the one window, were the screen of trees. The light effects were easily managed by raising or lowering the blind during the day, and by doing the same with Pen's kerosene lamp on the sill at night. Ben could imitate the mooing of the cows through a conch shell which was hidden under one of the haycocks, and a couple of cocoanut shells and the marble mantel imitated very well the approach of their horse. For it had occurred to them, happily or unhappily, to make themselves the parents of the young couple who had spilled the milk, and to arrive in time to catch them, to forgive them, to add their blessing — provided the sinning *couple* should procure the evening milk from elsewhere — and, so, curtain upon a bit of whimsical problem. Though Pen said:

"There shall not be the slightest doubt left that he moved heaven and earth to get the milk — such a man!"

"Of course not — for such a girl!" agreed Ben.

So the play was named

"SPILLED MILK"

and sent to Bass under its assumed name, and received back with this startling note on the margin of the manuscript: "*Not Original*," though three months of starvation and waiting lay between.

"The fact is," said Ben, "we have been caught. It isn't original."

"It happened. I would like to know what could be more original."

"Dearie, I see it all now. It is only a report of something we saw. It should have come from up here."

Ben touched his tired head.

VIII — NO AUTOMOBILE THIS YEAR

IT was some days before they recovered sufficiently to talk about it. And even then Pen's sunken eyes and her lassitude of body and spirit told what she suffered. Ben kept by her side and tried to laugh.

"You have forgotten how," said Pen. "Poor Ben!"

"Have I, though!"

Ben laughed a shrill "Ha! ha!"

"I would rather see you cry than laugh like that."

"All right."

Ben acted it.

"Too well, dear old Ben," said his sister, wiping his face.

Ben went out with his head down and not another word. He came back presently and was serious and very tender with his sister.

She said that she would stay in bed — to rest — perhaps for days and days.

"No, Pen, dear old girl, we have fought bravely, worked hard, lost, and now we mustn't give up — as you are doing — we will not — you must get up and come out with me. Presently

we are going to try again — when we have both rested a bit — we will try till we succeed.”

“No, Ben, dear, I want to stay here. You see, you don’t know how bad it is with me.”

“Then you must tell me.”

“There won’t be any box.”

“Nor any automobile.”

“Nor dinner.”


“N — nor ‘the after.’ ”

“Poor Pen!”

“Yes, Ben, dear, since it is all over and become impossible, I feel like those poor culprits who confess not only what they are being hanged for, but all their other crimes — committed and uncommitted. Your sister Pen has been foolish enough to have — Ben, I honestly believe that, to be truthful, I shall have to say — *fallen in love* — in one night. That is my disgrace! And, I thought if our play succeeded and they came to see it — why — there is no telling what good friends we might have become. Oh, Ben, here it is all out: I really was wild enough to think that for next year we would write a play for four and drag them into it with us. Something on a farm that they could do realistically at first. You know farm plays live forever and make everybody rich. I thought of that, too.”

“Dear, dear old Pen!” said Ben, kissing her.

“And a farmer, too, Ben, dear. Aren’t you



shocked? And without knowing whether he wanted me or not. But you said yourself it was all because there is no such thing as time on the stage."

"Did it mean all that to you, Pen, dear?"

"I'm afraid it did, Ben. You know how dreams grow upon one — especially if one is a woman — until one simply can't understand why they do not come true — unless Bass steps in. And I do dream so much. All happy, harmless little dreams, too, until this one came. Yet I should have known better. None of them come true. Oh, did you ever see such a difference between dreams and realities as there is in me?"

"Pen, do you know that I believe, somehow, it will all come true. God isn't unkind enough to always disappoint a gentle creature like you. You have had about all the bad luck that is coming to you, I honestly believe, and it must turn now. I am going to give luck a chance. I'm going to find our —"

"*Friends*," sighed Pen.

Then she suddenly sat up.

"Ben! You want them, too, don't you?"

Ben was silent a moment. Then he said: "Yes."

"Ben, come here."

Ben did this, and she kissed him all over his head and his face.

"You needn't tell me, Ben, dear. That is more for a man than for a woman — not telling. But I know all right. I suppose it is experience. I am sorrier for you than for me, Ben. But I am happier, somehow, too. What do you suppose we will do for a breakfast?"

"Oh, don't bother about *that*," said Ben before he could think.

"But — I am hungry," laughed Pen. "Awfully hungry."

"Oh, that's a good sign."

Ben had a small breakfast for her, presently.

"There is enough for both," chirruped Pen, happily.

"I have had mine," said Ben, straightly.

"You still *look* hungry," said Pen.

She was better then.

"Ben," she said, "we must get away from here, even if we have to walk. You are frightfully shabby, and so am I. And that is the commonest as well as the worst thing possible to people seeking engagements on the stage."

"But we must stay to see the successful piece. I am keeping my gun-metal cigarette case for that. I have been thinking. If I go to hunt our —"

"*Friends*," sighed Pen once more.

"— we cannot see the play."

"Toss up. There is a nickel in my purse."

The nickel decided that they were to stay.

"*Luck* is against us," sighed Pen.

"We will break the luck, dearie, and — go."

"No, no, no!" cried Pen. "That would be *very* bad. Let us follow our luck. I will press your trousers, Ben, dear; Mrs. Lem will lend me an iron. She said so the other day when she noticed that they needed it. And she said that we would not have to vacate until the season opened and her *paying* boarders came."

"It was the very day I told her we were sure of the prize."

"I don't think it necessary to tell her that we didn't get it — just yet, Ben, dear."

"The old, old Pen!"

Pen turned her brother's trousers to the light and shook her head, dubiously.

"Ink will take some of the shine off of the knees, they say, and I can make some paper poppies for my hat. It will be night and no one will know the difference, and I really believe that I can launder a shirt for you — perhaps, even, a whole waistcoat."

IX — UNIQUITY

ALL this Pen did — and with more and more cheer. And Ben was not found wanting. He turned the cigarette case into cash, and their seats were the best in the house.

“As becomes the unsuccessful poor,” he laughed.

And there it was — the very first thing on the bill — a head-liner indeed. It was called

“THE HAYFIELD,”

and there was a little overture, the theme of which was the song of the milkmaid they had heard. But they had come late and got the barest suggestion of this. Almost immediately the curtain went up.

“They only waited for us,” whispered Ben, gayly.

“You mean that we waited — for the house to be dark.”

Ben gave a gasp. The scene was the hayfield, precisely as they had seen it. The same young farmer was raking hay.

"Oh, Ben — have you ten cents for an opera glass?" whispered Pen, in awe.

"No. I don't need one, it is *he*. Sh! *She* will come on in a minute!"

And she did — over the same stile — singing the same song.

"Ben," whispered Pen, "*our* names are there — 'The Two Motts'!" What on earth does it mean?"

She pointed to the side of the proscenium arch, where the names of the players were posted, as usual.

"On the other side are 'The Two Peris.' That must be them. Do you think we are awake?"

"Stolen everything — even our names," said Ben, grimly.

Yet fascination held him to his seat — the very fascination of their villainy.

"But this is *their* beginning."

"Yes! See them fall down on the ending after such a beginning," said Ben, enjoying his triumph in advance.

But his triumph never came.

"Why, that is *us*!" Pen whispered so loud that the people in front turned.

It was. They were heard arriving. Their buggy, in fact, was seen.

And everything on the stage happened (up to

that walk under the trees) precisely as it had happened to them on that Summer afternoon.

The suggestion for the exchange of clothes was made precisely as they had made it. But, from that onward, the little play was different. It went on as follows:

THE FARMER: No, no, we need them in our business.

PEN (*very sweetly*): Yes, of course. But you can *farm* in anything.

THE MILKMAID: Not on the stage.

BEN (*in fear*): The stage?

THE FARMER: We are actors. We have been here making this play for three months. What you saw was a dress rehearsal.

THE MILKMAID: We are after that same prize.

PEN: Oh! Excuse me.

BEN: Oh! Excuse me.

(*Going.*)

THE FARMER: Look here! After all our three months we didn't have a play until you came—with the ending.

THE MILKMAID: We had only a beginning. That's what we were whispering about. You gave us the ending.

THE FARMER: Suppose we put you—and the horse—in it—

THE MILKMAID: And make it four?

BEN: Agreed.

(*Curtain.*)

"Clever!" laughed the gentleman in front of them to the lady with him.

"Yes," she replied, "and it is those same 'Two Motts' who failed so dismally last Winter."

"The deuce! How they fooled me. At every situation I expected something 'different.'"

"I thought it would end with — it's bully!"

"Yes — bully."

It was absolutely impossible of understanding until, for the first time, they looked at their own programmes and saw their own names staring at them — headliners, indeed, the authors! And now the house was shouting for *them*. A man behind cried out:

"Don't be afraid! We forgive you this time!"

The whole house laughed for happiness, and "The Two Motts" came out for their curtain call — many of them. So like themselves were these two, that Pen sighed to Ben:

"Pinch me, Ben, dear; I want to know whether or not I am awake. They are our very own clothes. Us!"

"You are awake," whispered Ben, ominously.

"And so am I." He started savagely up.

"Ben!" said his sister, trying to hold him in his seat.

"They have stolen everything from us. That is all right. That is how most dramatic authors live. But I will show you what happens to people who steal our good name for a bad play. Come! I won't quite kill him!"

He dragged her — literally — in tremendous

terror — straight behind the curtain and to the dressing-rooms.

On the way they passed Bass.

“ I haven't a minute's time now,” he cried, joyously; “ but you've done it — I told you you would! God bless you!”

X — BEN'S HURRY-UP WAY

MADDED still more by this, Ben plunged through the door of the farmer's dressing-room, using his tortured programme like a dagger, only to be met by a shout of joy and an embrace from the farmer, while Pen was swiftly enveloped by the milkmaid.

"Thank God," the young farmer was saying. "It was the only way. We owe you two thousand five hundred dollars, and it is right here waiting for you. Phyl, get it! You didn't answer our ads in the *Mirror*, so I got the 'Two Herons,' who don't come on till nine, to make up as you and play the parts until you should turn up — which we *thought* would be to-night. You see we were waiting for you. You've got the credit you deserve!"

But both Ben and Pen were too far gone in bewilderment to have an intelligent word.

"Wh — what?" asked Ben.

"I can't see, feel or hear," said Pen, laughing and crying, and now hugging the milkmaid savagely.

For the latter had got from her skirt, where

they were pinned, two new one-thousand dollar notes and one of five hundred — which she finally succeeded in getting into Pen's hands.

Ben grasped the farmer's two hands.

"Look here — you're the best —"

"N-noblest!" sobbed Pen, and hid her blushing face on the bosom of the milkmaid.

The young farmer looked at her and then said to Ben, while he continued to look at Pen:

"We've traded everything but sisters. It isn't sudden, you know. Ever since that night under the trees —"

"Yes, ever since that night under the trees," sighed Ben, also looking to where the two girls still stood embraced.

"No!" shrieked Pen. "Ben! No, no, no! You'll spoil everything by your hurry-up ways."

"Ah," said the young farmer, gently, going over to her; "let him spoil everything by his hurry-up ways. Please."

"On the stage there is no such thing as time," murmured the milkmaid, and, when she looked, found Ben close behind her with his eyes answering "Yes."

She blushed and clung again to Pen, while she, with her eyes back to the farmer, cried out, tragically:

"You wouldn't say that if you knew that these were paper poppies on my hat!"

"Yes, he would, dear," said the milkmaid.
"If you only knew!"

"And you, silly, do you know that Ben's knees are inked? Keep off!"

But these things had not the effect she had supposed for them. The farmer gazed affectionately at the paper flowers, the milkmaid thought the ink on Ben's knees heroic.

"Well, then, I'll crush you!" Pen cried out, recklessly, for very riot of happiness. "I'm hungry! I haven't eaten a real meal in four months! And I am going to have one — a steak — so big!"

She parted her pretty hands as far as they would go.

"Good Lord!" said the young farmer, in a voice and with a look which were final.

"Do you really mean that?" asked Pen, very softly.

"Yes. Did the prize signify all that to you?"

"Yes," said Pen, bravely. "And much — much more which I'm ashamed of."

The stage manager, fortunately, banged the door savagely.

"All out. Dressing-rooms needed!"

But happy Pen was already dragging them all toward the steak with which she had threatened herself.

Events were so great — those past and to come

— that it was some time before the pulses of the party became again normal.

Pen had had her big steak and was altogether happy.

The young farmer was repeating his question:

“How soon can you play the part?”

“Now!” cried happy Pen. “Haven’t I lived it four months?”

“He didn’t mean *that!*” Ben smiled. “I know a minister —”

“Ben!” She kicked him savagely under the table.

“Who cares?” cried Ben. “I never before had everything I wanted in one night.”

He had the milkmaid’s hand—quite in view.

“No one could possibly change a thousand-dollar bill,” sighed she — pretending objections also.

“I have some small change,” smiled the farmer.

“No!” cried Pen, “absolutely and positively no!”

Nevertheless, presently they were on an up-town street diligently looking at the numbers over the doors.

Suddenly Pen dropped her farmer’s arm and wiped something from her face. The handkerchief became red.

“Good heavens!” cried the farmer; “blood!”

"Poppies!" laughed Pen.

She took her hat off and swung it in her hand. The wind blew her wet hair about her face, making it beautiful.

"But — it is raining," whispered the farmer.

"Is it?" whispered Pen, looking up, and very close to him.

"You are the loveliest —"

The milkmaid was heard to cry out. When she hurried up to them she showed, happily, a pair of blackened gloves.

"It *was* ink," she cried.

"It *is* ink," laughed Ben.

"Ink!" nodded Pen, tragically.

"They wouldn't have it in the play, so Pen put it on my trousers!"

After that I do not know what happened — save that they went on in that uptown street looking for a number. The last thing I heard was the farmer whispering to Pen:

"You *know* there is no such thing as time on the stage."

"No!" cried Pen, with her face, made more lovely by the poppy stains, turned toward the lights above. "No, no, no! Positively and absolutely *no!*"

But they went on looking for the number.

DULL JIM



I — JIM AND JIM'S WIFE

“**J**IM,” said Mrs. Brood, across the breakfast-table, “I’m tired of cooking for a block-head. I’m going to leave you.”

Jim choked, but finally said, with a smile: “Ye — yes. Of course —”

As if it were the most natural thing in the world, whereas it had happened only once before.

“You don’t seem dam’ glad!” gibed his wife.

“Well — no,” faltered Jim. “But — I *am* pretty rough for such a nice girl. You’ll need some money — a good deal, I expect — like the last time. I’ll bring you some this evening. I think your relatives — where you go — ain’t rich. Pinker will advance —”

“I will not be here this evening,” said his wife.

“Oh!” slipped out of Jim. “Mu — must you go so soon?”

“That’s what I must,” laughed his wife. “Or else it’s all off!”

“Then I’ll send it up by Johnny. He’s honest —”

“Don’t bother.”

Jim played a moment with his napkin.

"You haven't had all the money you ought — a pretty girl like you. You ought to have nice frocks and lots of 'em. Pinker's talking about a partnership. Then I'll have a little more."

Jim wasn't exactly certain why he had said all that — very much for Jim.

If, subconsciously, he fancied that it might keep her from going, she did not leave him in the dark.

"I shall have more money than you and Pinker together, Jim."

"Oh!" said Jim.

His wife was fitting her hat coquettishly upon her pretty hair.

"Has your mother got her fortune?"

"No," laughed his wife, "but her daughter has — nearly six feet of it!"

"Oh!" said Jim again.


His wife turned upon him with a hatpin in her mouth. She was really very pretty. Much too pretty, most people thought, for such an indifferent-looking chap as Jim, and extraordinarily feminine.

"Jim," she said, "is it possible that you don't — understand?"

"Sure!" said Jim.

"Fine!" laughed his wife. "That's right."

Jim, like most dull people, was wont to cloak his lack of comprehension with the protestation of complete knowledge.



"Yes, yes!" he added hastily, "of course I understand."

"It couldn't be helped, you know. These things happen — that's all."

She slapped him on the back.

"Ye — you're nappy, ain't you, to get away, did-dear?"

"Did-dear!" mocked his wife.

"You — you were — the other time," half-smiled Jim.

"Shut up!" cried his wife, savagely.

"I know you don't like to recall *that* going away. But I do," said Jim, humbly.

"Why?" demanded his wife, stridently.

"You came back," answered Jim. "You didn't like your relatives."

"Oh!"

She had thought it might be some better understanding, at last, of *why* she went away — and why — she had come back.

"If you expect that — *this* time —"

"No, no!" interrupted Jim. "Oh, no." He did not want her negative in very words. "But — here's a key."

He had taken the key from the ring and was handing it to her.

"Not on your life!" cried his wife, pushing it away.

Jim kept it toward her.

"You might want to stop in — just stop in — to see how bad I'm getting along — without you — and I mightn't be at home. You can never tell."

She took the key. It was the easiest way.

"No," she laughed, "one can never tell."

Jim felt better.

"And I suppose you'd be fool enough to take me back?"

"Of course!" said Jim, huskily. "Why not?"

"And be glad?"

"Oh, my God!" breathed Jim.

"No matter what had — ahem — happened?"

Jim couldn't trust his tongue, so he nodded his head.

"I want you to be happy," he said, then.

"And — if you're happier away from me than with me — well, I'll be — honest!"

His wife had put on her coat and was pulling it in to her pretty figure.

Jim watched her, breathing hard. A near-by clock struck.

"Hello! I'm going to be late. Pinker hates that. And it's one of the things he likes about me — that I never am. I'm going to be his partner —"

He started toward the door, then, distractedly, back.

"I'll risk that once and take you to the train!"

"No, you won't!"

"You'd rather go alone?"

"I sha'n't go alone."

Jim paused, and tried to think what that meant.

"You hate loneliness," he said.

"I'm not going to be lonely. Sure you understand, Jim?"

"Oh, yes, yes!" averred Jim.

"Well, if you don't, it's up to you. I've spoken about as plainly as I can. More plainly than most of them do." She laughed, then added, "Most of them don't speak at all. They leave a note!" The clock struck the quarter.

"Shall I kiss you?" asked Jim, uneasily, putting on and taking off his hat.

"No, thank you."

"I know you don't like to be —"

Jim held out his hand, but both of hers were busy with a small bag. At the door Jim turned, suppressing a madness within.

"Well — good-by — Freda."

"Good-by, Jim."

She was still busy with the bag. Jim opened the door.

"Got the key?" he asked.

She held it up to him without looking.

Jim stepped out and then staggered back.

"I — I'll put away the dishes."

She nodded.

A dull, mad moment. Jim still stood in the door.

"Say, Jim," she said, with a bit of pity, "as I told you, these things happen — and that's *all*! Well, why don't you let 'em happen to you?"

Jim passed a hand over his forehead.

"I don't —"

He had almost said, "I don't understand."

"If you come across a nice girl, Jim, old man, don't be a fool about me. Marry her!"

"Marry her!" gasped Jim.

"Get a divorce. I'll give you reason! Now, get out! Good-by!"

She pushed him out of the door and closed it.

"If he had the key he'd come back," she laughed, throwing it into the bag. "Lucky!"

II — HAD JIM LOST ANYONE?

WHEN Jim returned in the evening, tired and gray, he put his hand into his pocket for the key, then remembered that he had given it to his wife. He stood wearily, a moment, on his doorstep, looking at the closed blinds, then turned away.

"I guess I'm glad," he mused. "I'd be lonely — with her away. Empty — everything empty! That's how it was the other time. Funny how everything goes when she does! Just a little bunch of fine dry-goods! Well — a place to sleep — somewhere —"

Jim wandered on aimlessly, thinking about the things she had said — especially that about finding another girl. How *could* he marry — another girl? What reason *could* she give him? You see how dull Jim was!

Presently he had gone half-way around the block and found himself directly in front of the little house which backed up to his. He knew it by the curtain in the bay window. In the parlor sash was a dingy sign of "Lodger Wanted." Jim knocked, and, presently, went in.

"Could I get a room here?" he asked of the woman who came.

"For how long?" she asked in turn.

"I can't say, exactly," answered Jim, for he *would* not say — how long his wife *might* be away. Something within him refused.

"I don't take transients," said the woman. She rose dismissingly.

"Wait! Wait!" said Jim, hoarsely, forced to say it. "I think — I think it will be for — some time."

"Lost anyone?" asked the woman, meaning by death.

"Yes," answered Jim, not meaning that.

"Wife?"

"No — oh, no!" said Jim.

"Oh," said the woman, "got no wife?"

"N — no."

"I have nothing but the second story back."

"I'll take it," said Jim, eagerly.

"I dunno," said the woman. "It's my daughter's room. She may come back any time."

"I'll take it," repeated Jim, not heeding what was said about the daughter.

"She's a nice girl, my Madge. The men are crazy about her. But I want her to marry some one a little older than herself — a steady man —"

"I'll take it," said Jim.

"It gets pretty hot under the tin roof."

"I'll take it."

"And it's nearly summer."

"I'll take it."

"Madge —"

But Jim had stumbled up the stairs into the second story back and closed the door — locked it.

Then he opened the blinds and sat by the window which faced his own little house. Often she had flown out of the house when she "felt that way" and had come back the same night. But the dawn broke and no light had come into the windows of the little house opposite.

At six o'clock Jim put on his hat and went to work. It wouldn't do to be late two days in succession. He had forgotten to eat.

After that Jim sat at the window every night and watched for the light to come into the windows opposite. And, then, when he went to bed, he lay with his face that way — and the blinds wide. After a while he would sleep — not much — waking every hour — with his eyes at once wide — toward the little house across the alley. In these nights, of course, Jim thought things. But never evil. Instead of matters growing worse and worse, as he thought about them, they grew better and better. For, more and more, as he thought, he found excuses for his wife. He

had a rough bit of philosophy upon which he lived. It was simply to think the best and not the worst. Freda had gone to her relatives and he did not blame her. He must be tiresome to her. He laughed. Why shouldn't she be? He was often tired of himself!

Then, one night as he watched, a knock came upon his door. He absently opened to the landlady and her daughter.

"Why don't you have a light?" the woman asked.

"Why?" questioned Jim, dully.

"Well—you can't receive ladies in the dark—"

And she struck a match which she had brought with her.

"Don't!" cried Jim, snatching and extinguishing the match.

"Excuse me," he said then, gently and sanely, as he realized his rudeness. "But—"

"Sitting in the dark this way is going to make you—" the woman touched her head—"see things."

"It's pleasanter," said Jim, apologetically, "I'm always tired in the evening. I work hard."

"Oh, well"—laughed the woman.

Jim was so glad to have her waive his eccentricity that he became almost amiable.

"There is a bright moon! See!" He

opened the blinds wider. "Isn't that better than a hot gaslight?"

Now, for the first time, the daughter spoke. And her voice was very pleasant.

"It's romantic, anyhow," she said, and a bit of a smile went with it.

And Jim, for the first time, was aware of the presence of the girl. He turned to look at her. A very pretty, youthful face she had, with serious eyes. So, at least, the moon told him. Jim couldn't have told what was in his mind — so dull was he — but it was the thought that this was not precisely the sort of daughter his landlady ought to have.

"But," laughed the woman, "you can't see how pretty my daughter is. And I want you and her to be good friends. She don't like the hobble-dehoys. She prefers serious men."

The daughter had flushed and turned away at her mother's speech, but, she turned again to him. A long look passed between them.

"I see," said Jim, very gently.

"I hope, too," said the girl, halting, "that we shall be — friends."

She held out her hand and Jim took it. She let it remain. Jim did not release it. Something made his heart beat with more ardor.

"Mother tells me," the girl went on, "that you have lost someone —"

Jim dropped the pretty hand. He was appalled. He had forgotten!

"Yes," answered Jim, contritely.

He turned toward the window.

"I am a nurse," said the girl, "and am used to — sorrow. I broke down and they gave me a furlough. I shall be here a little while. Perhaps I can help you — somehow?"

"I'm all right!" said Jim, roughly, with his back to her.

There was a moment of silence.

"Good-night," said the girl, then.

"I don't think you're very polite to a lady!" said the woman.

"Come, mother!" said the girl.

Jim did not turn. The door opened — closed. He still stood at the window. Presently his nostrils began to inhale some fragrance the girl had left behind. It was very pleasant to Jim.

The woman came again the next evening.

"Madge ain't mad at you," she said, "she pities you."

"Why?" asked Jim.

"Well — like she does her patients, I expect."

"I ain't sick," said Jim, rudely.

"She thinks you are."

"I ain't!" said Jim.

"What do you think of her?"

"Who?"

"Madge."

"Oh! She's all right."

"That's what she thinks about you. She's fond of serious people. Say — ever think of getting married?"

"No," said Jim.

"You ought to. I expect you got some money?"

"Not much."

"Well, then, you're awful straight. You pay everything right up. And you're always home at night. I think you'd make a good husband — for a serious girl — like Madge."

Jim said nothing.

"Even if you're married," the woman went on, "anyone can see that there's something wrong. I don't see any wife around — nor no other woman. I expect you could get a divorce. There must be lots of reason. You know, if a man's wife leaves him — that's desertion, and he can get a divorce — if he don't get foolish and make up with her. Or a man, either. That's how I got mine. A man's a fool to waste his time over a woman who don't care. There's as good fish in the sea as ever was caught."

Jim's dull mind caught upon the fish — nothing else.

"No, there ain't," he said. "Fishing's

mighty bad where I go. And it's getting worse all the time."

The woman laughed.

"Madge is right, I expect. You do need treatment. I pity you, too. I hope you won't get violent while you're here."

Not only did Jim not understand this, it never went far enough into his mind to cause inquiry concerning it.

Nevertheless, later, came the strange thought, again, that nature had, somehow, made a mistake in giving such a mother such a daughter.

III — WHILE THE DAYS WERE STILL LONG

ONE day, as Jim was coming home in the evening, while the days were still long, he met Madge. She was some distance from home and was walking rapidly.

“Wait!” she laughed, and held out the pretty, small hand.

It was a mere flake, and Jim refused it, ruefully showing his own, black from handling his tools.

“Nonsense!” cried the girl, seizing his hand and pulling him after her. “That is the only real hand there is — the one which works. I’d rather shake it than the lily-white one of a millionaire! Come! You must let me walk home with you. Such a beautiful day — such air —! Doesn’t it make you happier to be just a part of it?”

“Why — ye-yes,” said Jim.

As they walked on he looked at her pretty, glowing face, and her neat clothing, and had a strange thought. To others it might not have been a good thought. But it was so to dull Jim,

who had never had an evil one in his small life.

"I wonder if she's as white and round as Freda?" he thought.

"What do you do?" asked the girl.

"Do?" counter-questioned Jim.

No one on earth had ever taken the trouble to ask what he did. He was not certain that Freda knew.

"Plumb," said Jim.

"Oh, you're a plumber!" said the girl, with interest. "That's fine. If plumbers were all conscientious in their work — this would be a different world!"

She laughed at her banal ending.

And Jim laughed, too.

"I am," he said, simply.

"If they would only think — think — think! Invent, invent, invent! What a bacteria-killer good plumbing is!"

"I've been doing a little inventing," said Jim, with the first pride in himself he had ever felt.

"Oh! What?" asked the girl. "Why, that is the creative instinct — the marvel of the world."

Jim was ready to retreat. But she wouldn't let him. She asked again:

"What — what? Every invention in plumbing is important — very!"

"Not much for sanitary," said Jim, "but only for convenience. I got a scheme for milling the

edges of the turns on valves. You know how they slip through soapy fingers."

"Don't I!" cried the girl. "That's a *very* good invention!"

"The milling is self-cleansing. It won't fill up with dirt or soap and make the handling worse than before. It has openings back of the milling. The dirt or soap pushes through when the fingers press on it and falls down and is washed into the drain."

"That will be fine for hospitals. You know, one of the difficulties is to keep our hands aseptic."

And, all the way home he talked about his work — and, even, himself!

"Say, I'm ashamed," he said, just before they reached the little house, in the very first speech of "politeness" of his life, "but you got me going. It's your own fault if you're tired of my chinning."

"I'm not tired of your chinning," said the girl, seriously. "And, doesn't it make you feel encouraged in your work to have someone interested in it?"

"Why, yes," admitted Jim, with genuine surprise. "Only — it's kind of — new!"

"Now, listen!" cried the girl. "I've got some books you'll like to read, and some *I'd* like to read to *you!*"

"Good!" said Jim. "That'd be great! Reading to me!"

And he meant nothing.

After that, from time to time, the mother and the daughter knocked at Jim's door. Jim told them of other inventions — there seemed to be a new one each day! Sometimes the girl read. Sometimes there was only intimate silence.

"Aren't you more active than you used to be?" asked she, one night.

"Why — yes," said Jim, wondering.

"Brain a little clearer and surer — isn't it?"

"Why — yes."

It was Jim himself — if you can believe that — who asked the question:

"Why is that?"

"I think," said the girl, quietly, "that it is because we talk things over here. Don't you think more frequently now of 'inventions?'"

"Yes," nodded Jim. "Pinker's on. We're partners now."

"And, sometimes they are suggested by our talks here, aren't they?" asked the girl.

"Yes — most always, now," answered Jim.

"You find, don't you," asked the nurse, "that new ideas come to you as you *make* the thing you have invented?"

"Yes — always."

"I think," the girl went on, "people are like magnets —"

"I know about magnets!" Jim cried out, happily. "It's in one of the books you got me."

He produced from his pocket a small pair of magnets.

"I got 'em," he explained, a bit shyly, "because I wanted to see 'em work!"

As he put them down on the table he began to laugh. Suddenly he stopped.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl.

"I laughed," said Jim, sullenly.

"Well? Isn't it good to laugh?" chided the girl.

"I got no business to," said Jim.

"But you have!" insisted the girl, "no matter — what — who — you have — lost!"

"You dunno!"

Jim rose and looked out of the window. He loosed the shutter.

The girl drew the magnets to her and placed them a short distance apart.

"Jim!" she called, pre-occupiedly.

Jim turned like a flash.

"Oh! Excuse me!" cried the girl, lowering her flushed face.

"Your mother says you mustn't?" asked Jim, sullenly.

"No."

Then he remembered how little likely such a mother was to prevent such a daughter from using Jim's first name. "Madgel!" said Jim.

"Did it ever occur to you that two magnets, six inches apart, must be very lonely?" smiled the girl.

"Lonely?" wondered dull Jim. "How's that?"

The head of the girl went deeply into the arms on the table. Jim knew by the pretty, young shoulders that she was sobbing. But, only so. Four times he reached out to touch her. Each time he got a bit nearer. The fifth time he would have reached her. But the wind slammed the shutter. He turned his back and looked out, his nails biting into his palms.

"Don't they seem lonely, now? Dead?"

Jim turned to see that the girl was regarding the magnets. Her head was between the pretty hands. The voice was not yet free of its tears. Jim stood over her, and, again reached out to her.

"Only two pieces of steel. But —"

She began to move them together.

"See how they wake up and live as they approach — understand one another — now they would fly together — if I would let them — nothing keeps them apart — but me — the moment I take my finger off —"

"Take it off!"

Jim savagely snatched it away.

The two pieces clicked together.

"They were two, a little while ago," breathed the girl, "now they are one!"

"And it's mighty hard to get them apart!" added Jim, showing her that it was.

"That's because each has, at last, found the one right thing to cling to," smiled the girl. "It would seem cruel to part them!" There was a pause.

"I think people are just like that," mused the girl, diffidently, "when the two who belong together come together. Don't you think God meant that no one is complete without another?"

"How's that?" asked dull Jim.

"Maybe every man needs some woman. And every woman needs — some man. I suppose that's why God made us so different. And, often, something, not as plain as my finger, keeps them apart."

"Mebby," admitted Jim, amazed at all this, and, more amazed that he understood it all.

"And, then, when the right two come together, they are just like these magnets — they are one — each being nothing without the other."

"D'you mean you — me?" cried Jim, ferociously.

"Yes," whispered the girl, letting her head again fall into the arms on the table. "I am

ashamed. But, oh, perhaps it is a sin to let happiness pass you because you are afraid to let it know that you are there!"

"I expect that magnet *and some other piece of iron* would come together just the same," said he, hardly.

"Yes," whispered the girl, dragging herself out.

"Mistake!" said Jim to himself. "Right kind of daughter for mother."

But, when she did not come the next night, Jim was restless, and, instead of sitting silent and watching the windows opposite, he paced the apartment, and, several times opened the door and looked down the steps.

Neither did she come the night following. But her mother did — and apologized for her daughter.

"You're so much better Madge thought you wouldn't need her just now. She's gone to visit Annie Bray."

"When will she come back?" demanded Jim, curtly.

"I can't say," answered the mother.

"If she don't get back to-morrow," said Jim, savagely striding the room. "I'm going away."

"Why?" asked the woman.

"I can't stand it!" said Jim.

"What?" asked the woman.

"I don't know!" thundered Jim, stopping in front of her and stamping. "Ask her. She knows. She's done something to me!"

The woman, a bit frightened, said hastily:

"I'll telephone her to come back. You're worse."

IV — THEN THE LIGHT CAME

AND so, the following evening, as Jim sat in the darkness, facing the door, with his back to the window, he heard her arrive. And then, presently, she came — alone. Jim started toward her with his arms savagely out.

“Good-evening,” she said, cheerily, and held out her hand.

Jim took it tamely.

“Why did you go away?” he demanded.

“Sit down, Jim,” she said — and he obeyed.

“Are you — worse?” A bit of laugh went with the hesitating last word.

“Yes. What is the matter with me?”

“Nothing — nothing at all,” said the girl.

“Yes, there is,” said Jim, doggedly. “I’m crazy. I usen’t to feel that I had a brain. But now it whips me all about. And you did it. I was asleep up there. You woke me.”

“Let us thank God,” said the girl.

“No!” shouted Jim. “I wish I was as dumb as before! I wish I felt like a whipped, kicked cur all the time again! I wish I thought *you* were like her!”

"Who?" asked the girl.

Jim only slammed the blind shut:

"That bad woman over there? Who left a good husband for a life of shame?" she asked.

"Do you know?"

Jim clapped his hands on his ears and cried "no" like a madman.

"I'm a pig," he said, opening the shutters. "My thoughts are rotten!"

"No," said the girl, softly, "but perhaps there is something you ought to talk to me about."

"What am I to do when you go away to stay? You were away one night and I was in hell."

There was a long silence. They looked toward each other in the half-darkness. Then the head of the girl fell wearily.

"That is not for me to say," she answered, very gently. "I am only a woman. And it is ours to wait — and it is yours to end the waiting — or to make it eternal. You are a man. Often we get tired, very tired — we women — of giving — giving — always giving — and never getting, Jim. And — once I tried to let you know and you got angry with me. So it is the woman must wait."

And, just at this moment, came that saying of his wife:

"Jim, if you come across a nice girl — marry her."

"Look here," said Jim, savagely, "*would* you marry me?"

The girl slowly lifted her head.

"Yes," she said.

Both were silent a long while.

"Well, there *is* something. But —"

Into the corner of Jim's eye came a light. It was reflected from some other building into his room. He quickly turned to the windows he had forgotten to watch. They were dark.

"Was there a light in those windows?" asked Jim, of the girl, savagely.

"I saw none," answered the girl.

"Wait! Wait here!" he cried, and ran down the stairs and out at the door. He pounded and rang and called at his own door, but there was no answer. He went back to his lodgings. As he passed the door of the girl's room, he heard sobbing. As at that other door, he knocked and called, but, again, there was no answer.

"I couldn't do it — now!" Jim called through the door. "Do you hear? I can't! You — it's your fault — now."

"You must — now!" was her answer.

He tried the door. It was locked.

For four days Jim kept his door locked. Then a gentle knock came upon it and he opened.

Madge was in a thin negligée and her pretty

hair was on her shoulders. Her face was very white and she carried a book in her hand.

"Mother says that you haven't eaten for four days," she said, gently. "May I order you some food?"

Jim shook his head.

"Then —" she pointed to the house across the way and was, for a moment, unable to speak — "you must go."

"Who told you?" asked Jim.

"You did. It is your house. She who went away with another man is your wife. You are waiting for her light to know that she has come back. She will come back."

"Why?"

"Any woman would come back to you — Jim."

"I didn't understand then. But I do now. You made me. I can't go now!"

Madge opened the book and read:

"'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow!'"

Then the light appeared in the windows opposite. They stood a moment and watched it. Madge softly opened the door.

"You must go," she said, at last. "Remember! — as snow — as wool — white!"

"I can't," said Jim. "I know — now. I'm not white myself, any more!"

"What will you do? She is there — repent-

ant — or she wouldn't *be* there — will you — can you — leave her alone — there? ”

“ Can you send me there? ” asked Jim.

“ No,” sobbed the girl. “ But, Jim, there is a God and he has done this thing. He sends you.”

“ No! ” thundered Jim, “ you have done it. You made me an equal, a superior. I am the *man* in this partnership. I can't go back to the crawling worm business. Look at me! ”

The girl lifted her wet face with love in every lineament.

“ Yes! ” she breathed.

“ I look different? ”

“ Yes! ”

“ My face tells you that I know something now? ”

“ Yes! ”

“ The books you gave me! ”

“ Oh, my dear Jim, did even they help? ”

“ I stand straight. I am six feet now. I was only four.”

“ Oh, yes! ”

“ I *am* a man,” thundered Jim, beating the table. “ And I know. You have made me a man. You have told me about her.”

He pointed toward the light.

“ I? ”

“ You. How could I be what you have made me and not know — that there are — there never

were — any relatives for her to go to. And, yet you send me back there to crawl like a craven again! ”

“ Ah, beloved, there will be no more of that,” said the girl. “ She will feel and know your new manhood as I do. You need never tell a woman who loves a man what he is. She knows! Oh, Jim, if you do not go, all that I have suffered — suffer now — and shall suffer — will be in vain. I cannot marry you. I know what it means. God has done it. He has said that one’s sins, though scarlet, shall be as white as snow, so it will be. You cannot go to her because her sin is scarlet now. But, suppose God is as good as his word and makes her clean? Oh, as she was at first? What then? Though you married me, you would go to her — you would have to. And, if God has sent her back to you, it is because it is His purpose to make her white as snow! Go, Jim. And, let us make this bargain: If God does *not* do this miracle, then you shall come back to me. I will wait — wait endlessly. I know that you will play fair with her — and me. Yes, my dear, dear Jim, and with yourself. If it is meant that you are to have me — so it will be. If not, put such a light in your window as you looked for. And, when I know, I will put one in mine. Jim, dear, oh, my Jim, God sent me only to help you — and that is done — He is through

with me. I thought it was for something else — but it was only for that — to help — prepare you — for this. God has His price for all things. His price for this is *my* heart. I have given it. It took four days — there — in my room. But it is done. *I* have paid for *you*. That is all the sweetness I am to have. We don't know why God should take innocent *me* and make me pay for guilty her. But there is some reason for it. Perhaps it is that you might be ready to understand and save her *now*. Because — now is the one time she *can* be saved. Let us think what may happen if you do not! Where will she go? Back into the streets?"

"Stop!" cried Jim. "I must."

"You must," whispered the girl.

Jim passed down and out.

"I — will — pray," whispered Madge, "until I know that all is well. God will — must tell me that. You must — with a light. Then I will show a light in the window. Then let me see her — just once! But if she cannot be saved — will not — I will wait for the light. Just come back."

V — THE DUST OF A YEAR

THE door stood wide open when he arrived. It was cold — raining. He passed in and closed it. The echo was still hollow with emptiness. He felt beneath his feet the dust of the year which had passed. Just where he halted, in the little hall, was where they had parted. In the small dining-room were yet the remains of their last breakfast together. This he saw by the light of matches. At last he found her in their tiny kitchen, on the floor, beside the stove she had sought for warmth. She was dressed in some wonderful, glittering finery — wet and bedraggled.

He lifted her into the rocking chair he had made comfortable with cushions in the first weeks of their marriage. He remembered that, then, she used to sit there and sing and sew.

She seemed quite lifeless, at first, but Jim kept his head, and, presently, she drew a breath and looked about. She knew Jim, and rested her head tiredly against him as she used to do at first. Jim gave the head a better resting place.

When she got better she took her head away.

"Been — here — a long — time — haven't I?" she asked.

"How long?" asked Jim.

"It was Monday —"

"My God," said Jim, "then that *was* your light on Monday night!"

She nodded.

"What is it now?"

"Thursday."

"Four days," she counted on her fingers. "*Is* that all? Seems longer. I thought I'd just run in — like you said — and see how you were getting along. I was so cold — so very, very cold! And so hungry! I thought you might have some fire — and some — food. But — you were gone — not waiting for me as I imagined. And so — I about died. Did you bring me to?"

Jim tore out the wainscoting, and put it into the stove.

She felt the heat. "Oh, that is good — good!" she said, stretching out unsteadily toward it.

"I had no place to go, Jim — no place on earth. Let me stay until this shivering stops. And give me a little food. Then I will go. I know there is someone else. I saw you and her. That told me that I loved you. There are places for such as I. But not when one is so thin and sick and cold. At those places one must

be gay. Very gay! One can paint out the whiteness, but not the shiver."

While she was dizzily saying this, Jim carried her up the stairs and to the bed, where the covers were turned down as she had left them. He handled her lovingly, touching, reverently, the things which had touched her — the bedraggled spangles — the high-heeled satin shoes — the silken stockings — the wonderful laces — putting upon her, at last, some of the humble clothing for the night, she had left behind. There was great splendor in this for Jim — the first time he had been so near his wife. He drew the cheap coverings over her and tucked them about the bare shoulders and waited until she breathed of sleep. Then he turned the light low and went out.

So she slept, and woke to the grateful warmth of fire and the smell of food. No waking that she remembered had been so sweet as that — nor no rest.

Jim was waiting — listening, below, and, almost with her first movement, he was at her side with food. He lifted her head in one hand and fed her with the other. They said nothing — only smiled now and then.

VI — UP TO GOD

THEN, again, she slept, very sweetly, so that it was quite morning when she woke. Jim was still there.

"Have you been here all night?"

Jim nodded.

"Must I go now?"

"No," said Jim.

"I may stay a little longer?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Yes — if —"

Jim choked dismally. He turned and looked toward those other windows.

"Jim," said his wife, "you understand — now?"

"Yes," choked Jim. "She — the girl you saw me with — made me to understand."

"And you still want *me*?"

"*She* sent me to you."

After she had slept again, Jim opened the blinds to let in the much-needed sunshine. The light showed the piteous ravages the year had made in her beauty. And she, woman-like, read his eyes.

"Yes," she said, "I have lost that. I'll tell you how I've lived. Then you'll understand."

"Don't!" said Jim. "What's the use? You need help. I'm helping you. That's all. Mebby after awhile."

"But one thing you must know *now*. I was deserted — that is why I came back. Not repentance."

There was a silence. Then the woman cried out:

"Oh, Jim, why did you let me go? Why didn't you knock me down — kill me? A woman needs that when she's going wrong!"

"Then you'd be dead," said Jim, softly. "Once, when I was little, I caught a robin — a little red-breasted thing, and put him in a cage I made, and hung him in the window where I worked, thinking he'd sing for me. But he never did. I had made him sorry — not happy. We didn't understand. He was a bird — I was a boy. For, the other birds would come and tell him things — the sunshine I was keeping him from — the worms and the flying — I suppose. So I opened his cage and said, 'Go.' He wouldn't move. I put in my finger and pushed him off the perch. He fell. He couldn't use his wings. He died. And the other birds came and chattered at me. That taught me a lesson — about letting things go which want to go."

"You don't think it too late for me?"

"No," said Jim. "She says not."

"You haven't tried pushing me off my perch."

"I expect," said Jim, "that I was about ready to be that mean, when that little girl you saw me with came in and read me something out of the Bible. 'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow.' Well, it's hard to believe. Hard! But I guess old God can work that or He wouldn't have said it. And, if He can do it for others, He'll do it for you. For you're prettier than any other woman He ever made—or were. If you ain't white no more, like He made you, He'll make you so again, if He thinks he ought—and He ought. If He thinks it's all right—why, it's all right, and I got no kick coming. It's up to God."


"God! How beautiful that sounds! And I've got to thank someone else for it!"

"Yes!" confessed Jim. "I didn't know. And when I did know—I couldn't have touched you—till she—much less forgive you. She's praying for us now."

"Look here," said his wife, turning Jim's face to her, "you've taken me back—that's all right. But you don't mean that you forgive me, too?"

There was a long silence.

"I forgive you," said Jim, "and if you go again and come back, I'll forgive you again."



She says I got to do it seventy-seven times. It's only two."

"I wouldn't exchange what you have given me back for heaven itself!" said Jim's wife. "I'll keep it now! I'll make you love me — if she can."

"You'll stay with me always, now?"

"Yes," said his wife. "And — I'll be true — true — so help me God! You — wanted to kiss me — and I wouldn't let you — when I went."

"Yes," said Jim, stooping dutifully toward her lips. But she withheld him.

"Every man, since then, who wanted to — has —"


Jim pursued his way to her lips, at last finding them.

Then there was a long silence. Jim had not been certain. But, in that silence he became so. So he said:

"You *are* white as snow. Because she's over there praying, believing God has done his miracle right now!"

A light appeared in the window of the little house across the way. One could see a girl in a ghostly garment and with a white face, holding a candle above her head. The light was a question.

"Who is that?" asked Jim's wife.



"Come!" said Jim. "That's her. She wants to see you. You'd better see her. It's the last time."

He too, lighted a candle and led his wife to the window, in her bed garments and flowing hair, and held the light above her. The two women looked at each other — for the first — for the last — time.

"She was praying for us," said Jim. "She is now. You can see that."

"Jim! Are you sure you want *me*?"

"She is," said Jim, hoarsely.

"Jim — she's — she's an angel!"

"Yes," said Jim.

Thus they stood until each woman's face piteously smiled. For, each was wondering why she who had not sinned must pay. And Jim was, too. He remembered what she had said — that God had a reason for it. This he could not find. Can you?

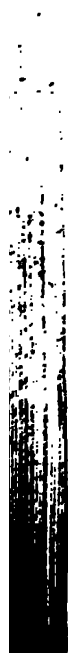
The little light across the way flickered and went slowly out, and all was dark. In the other window Jim blew upon the light until it ceased, then led his wife, sobbing, away.

"Oh, Jim! — if you can have her — why do you want me?"

"I do not — understand —" confessed dull Jim, for the first time, "but she does."

DOLLY JACK





I—WHEN PRELL WENT AWAY

PRELL and his wife, swimming in the sea, were suddenly carried out by one of its mighty currents.

“Well, what do you think of that?” laughed Prell.

“Impolite, to say the least,” gasped his wife, laughing too.

“And, by Jove, it is not done with us yet!” cried Prell, as he tried to stem the “pussy.”

“Swim—with the tide!” admonished his wife, a little more breathless.

“But, girl, to do that I must cross the pussy.”

He still laughed and tried. She said nothing that she might save her breath. But they were slowly beaten by the sea.

“Jack!” shrieked Mrs. Prell, in panic. The pussy had flung her fifty yards further to sea—parting them. “Don’t go away! Save me!”

“Of course, dearie,” said Prell, comfortably. “Don’t do a thing. Lie on your back. I can handle you better that way.”

“Yes!” gasped his wife, obediently. “You are so strong! You *will* save me!”

Prell struggled on.

"We're getting there — now — " he lied.


"Shall I call for help?"

"No. On your back. Still! Brave!"

He crossed the pussy then, but the effort was superhuman. Nevertheless, he got her within twenty yards of the shore. What he had, madly, in mind was to fling *her* safely upon the land — and rest.

Rescuers came with a line and shouts — which Prell was too far gone to heed or hear. He beat them savagely out of his way and sank. But his feet touched the bottom and he was strong again. With a mighty effort he drove upon the sand of the beach, bloody, blind, knowing nothing save with his feet, and did as he had madly planned. Then every nerve and muscle went out of commission, and the sea-pussy angrily made sure of one victim. The rescuers could see a hand whipped up now and then by the waves, and argued that Prell was on his back — possibly unconscious. A ship, gray as the sea and the air, which had come in on the west wind like a shadow, lowered a boat, and the rescuers thought they saw a limp thing dragged over its side. At all events, the shadow boat pulled back to the shadow ship and that put about and faded into the horizon.

Mrs. Prell woke with the Job's comforters of



the sanitarium for people with "head trouble," called "The Crazy Quilt House," about her.

"I don't think they got him," said Miss Fram, who was near-sighted. "I saw *nobody* dragged into *no* boat — as some of the others think."

"No," added Miss Carat, "that is why they rowed back without noticing our signals."

"Certainly they would not have been so impolite to a bevy of ladies as to turn their backs upon them and sail away without a word," breathed Mrs. Mouthon, unbelievably.

"They might have guessed that he belonged to one of us," said Miss Mergenthaler, severely.

"The only reasonable solution is that they didn't have him. He's at the bottom!" finished Miss Fram.

"He'll be ashore some of these days," put in Miss Mergenthaler. "They always come ashore."

The little wife, not yet able to think with the life left her, only looked agonizedly from one to the other. What did it mean? What were they talking about? Who?

And so she lay for six days. Then life came back, and her agony. She knew, now.

"I'm sorry," apologized Miss Mergenthaler, as if it were her personal delinquency, "but he hasn't come ashore."

"And it's past the time," said Miss Fram.

"I must have been mistaken," said Mrs. Mouthon, also in a vein of apology. "Maybe they *did* get him."

"We have watched on the beach ever since. He hasn't come," added Miss Fram.

"He must have been dead, dear," comforted Mrs. Mouthon, "anyhow."

"And they have given him heathen burial at sea!" sighed Miss Carat.

"Beautiful!" added Miss Mergenthaler.

"Beautiful!" gibed Miss Fram. "To be e't up by the sharks!"

Mrs. Prell put her hands over her sick ears and shuddered.

"What does that matter to him — now!" said Mrs. Mouthon. "He'll never know it!"

"Sh!" chided Miss Carat, with a motion toward the young wife, "but she does. And there's the digestion of him to think of!"

"She must pray," said Miss Fram, devoutly.

And with a motion she brought them all to the floor about the sick girl's bed and began loudly to recite the Scriptures for them that go down to the sea in ships.

"Stop!" cried the tortured wife.

When they had again sat, offended, silently up, Mrs. Prell said:

"Please, someone, put a pillow under my head."

Each insulted sanitarian looked at the other — until Mrs. Mouthon did it — with superb silence.

"I think we had better go now," she said then, looking round upon the galaxy who had been hurt.

"Wait!" commanded Mrs. Prell. "What was the name of the ship?" No one knew.

"Of what nationality was she?" They only stared.

"What kind of a flag did she carry?"

"I did not notice," said Mrs. Mouthon.

"No one did," added Miss Carat.

"Then — what kind of a ship was she? Schooner — square-rigger — barkentine — bark — what — what — what? I'd rather hear that than prayer."

"You should have noticed those things yourself —"

Miss Fram alone had any recollection concerning the appearance of the ship.

"It was faded and disreputable-looking," she said.

"Never mind, dear," ended Mrs. Mouthon. "If he's to come ashore he'll come. They all do, though it's late to expect it."

"And the sailors say," added Miss Mergenthaler, "that they can't help coming ashore at the spot where they went out to sea — they just can't help it — if they come. So you wait here."

"Ah," sighed Mrs. Prell. "How can I!"

"Why not?" guessed Mrs. Mouthon.

"What's your business — and that of your late husband?" demanded Miss Carat.

"Actors," said Mrs. Prell.

"Actors!" shrieked the lot together.

And they left her with an air which said plainly that they deserved what they were getting — if they were actors.

But there was another reason for Mrs. Prell's sigh — a reason which women tell only to women — but never to such women as these! As for Mrs. Prell, she had never told it to her husband.

II — WHEN HE CAME BACK

AFTER that little Mrs. Prell spent her life on the beach — a weird and solitary figure — watching for things which come ashore. Sometimes she would see, far out, Something which seemed to have floating garments — or hair — tossed up fitfully by the waves and wind — and she would follow for miles — until it came in. For, yes, things had a habit of coming ashore. And once, true, it *was* a body! She fell madly upon the poor thing and lay there breathless until the soaked bones hurt her. Then she parted the luxuriant hair and looked. It was a woman. And always after she was sorry for that look. It told her what *she* might have been on that day he had saved her.

She played no more, but lived in a small, low-browed house near the beach. And in less than a year came the baby Dorothy to help — both in the waiting and the living. Often there was little enough to eat in the small house, and never enough to wear when the weather was bad. But, it was waiting. And, the waiting was no longer

weary, but, indeed and in truth, happy. For somehow, in the nearly four years which passed, the certainty of Prell's coming grew rather than diminished. So that the sanitarians at The Crazy Quilt House now passed them by as gone quite mad. And yet it was to that saying of Mrs. Mouthon, that things which were lost at sea had a habit of returning at the same spot, that all this was due — and to that hope which springs eternal in the human breast.

Dorothy knew all about it except the horrors. So that many a strange man on the beach had been stopped by the pretty blond child with the question: "You my daddy?"

And it is good to relate that nearly all so stopped wished that they were.

In the days before Prell went away they had found the remains of a great tree on the beach which some tide had brought in, and they had dragged it to the top of the tallest of the hills and there had digged a hole and set it up. There were two bare limbs and a bare trunk, and, when it was put upright, they had a great cross on the highest point on the island.


In the pleasant and certain waiting, Dorothy had conceived the idea that her daddy would be very wet and hungry when he came in from the sea. And so she kept, cached in the cool, damp sand of the hill, certain foods, renewed when

they grew stale, and a torn blanket lashed to the cross and standing out like a signal in the wind — both of which things they needed desperately in the little low-browed house.

But it was pleasant waiting for daddy — and making these small sacrifices — even though the flesh sometimes fainted with unfaith and the tears fell from Mrs. Prell's pretty young eyes. Yet, is it not better to wait happily than to wait in woe?

Dorothy had never a doubt about the coming. So that she, one day, when the sun was hot, took off the little red dress she wore and sewed it, with great, irregular, child-stitches to the ragged blanket as her personal demand upon the sea. And at night they would light a beacon on the hill, in the light of which the cross might be seen. Not every night now. At first this was so, but sometimes there was no driftwood — and sometimes unfaith was so strong that it whispered in the heart of Mrs. Prell that phrase of despair: "What's the use!"

So that it was with no surprise at all that Dorothy found upon the beach, one morning, a man whose feet the surf still washed. His eyes were closed, his arm was under his head, and about his face were tangled long ropes of hair and beard. He was still very wet. Dorothy stooped and



touched the cold face. Then she parted the tangled hair and pressed open the eyes. She had been told that daddy's eyes were blue. These eyes were. She nodded her pretty blond head and said: "Daddy!"

Then she put an arm about the man's neck and laid her cheek contentedly to his. The cool salt water was very good. So the man woke — with such amazement in his eyes as might visit one fresh risen from the dead.

"Is it — heaven, you — angel?" he smiled.

"Daddy," nodded Dorothy again.

The man held her far off and looked at her.

"Wish — I was," said the man, exhaustedly.

"B'ue eye," insisted the child, bending down to peer into them. "Daddy!"

"I — had — no — little girl — when I went away," shook the man.

"Daddy. Come!" She tried to draw him up out of the water, which still washed over his bare feet. Then she tugged until she got him waveringly upon his legs. There was no talk. It was too difficult — especially the progress up the hill to the foot of the cross. And, when they arrived, Dorothy was almost as wet as he — with the fragrant perspiration of a child. The big man was glad to curl up and rest in the small bed which Dorothy and her mother had scooped out of the sand. Hot it was with the sun, and

soft was the sand. Then the child took down her signal from the cross and covered him with it.

"No use no more," she cooed, singing. "Daddy's *here!*"

The man maundered, in a fit of delirium the exertion had brought on, his history of four long years.

"Saw the signal — knew — out there!"

He pointed and the child then saw, for the first time, a strange, weather-beaten ship. A boat which had come near to the shore was returning to her.

"Knocked — plug out of boat. They couldn't follow. Awful swim — worse than the other. But I made it — beat 'em. Four years on a tramp! Irons! Whips! Round the Horn and back!"

The food Dorothy had cached proved its own excuse for being. For presently, still hurrying and perspiring, with no implement but her baby hands, she dugged it up and was putting it between the ravenous lips of the man.

At last he slept there — with the sun in his face — and the child's small fingers, filled with food, still between his lips. And she, too, very tired with a great day's work, slept, presently, with her cheek against his.

And there the mother, seeking the child a little later, found them.

"Daddy," explained Dorothy sleepily, and the other two had but a word each:

"Dolly!"

"Jack!"

**THE LITTLE LADY WHO WOULDN'T
SPOIL CHRISTMAS**



I — RUTH WOULD BUT COULDN'T GO

IN that pause which comes at the end of a dinner — weariness of each other, perhaps — Lucille, who sat opposite the serious Doctor, leaned toward him and whispered in confidential mischief:

“Christmas gift?”

The Doctor stopped twisting a ring around his little finger and started from his abstraction as if detected.

“Yes,” he smiled then, with a sigh.

“Why,” broke in Ruth, sitting next to him, whose engagement halted — no one quite knew why — “you have worn it a year!”

“Yes,” nodded the young man, “a year and sixteen days.”

“How very exact!” smiled Mrs. Prime, the hostess of the little Christmas house-party.

“That means — ahem! — sentiment!”

All the company waited.

“Sentiment,” admitted the young Doctor. But his nod was grave.

The pretty face of Ruth flushed with as much anger as one so gentle could show.

"Then it was last Christmas you got it!" she said.

"It was last Christmas," answered the Doctor softly.

"And you have never said a word about it, though you have flaunted it in my face ever since. Now it is all coming out."

Ruth rose and moved toward the stairs above which her room was.

"Wait!" said the Doctor so very gently that it had more of command in it than any savagery. "Ruth, dear, wait! Perhaps—Ah, Ruth, you are too—too much—yourself"—when he at last found the word he put it with fond emphasis—"for this sort of thing! Wait!" he commanded once more.

They had all risen impulsively from their places at the little quarrel, and the two children in the dinner-party ran to see what it was all about. Little Annie Gray asked:

"It is a lady's ring, isn't it, Doctor?"

"Yes," said Ruth, turning angrily upon him, "it is a lady's ring. Any child can see that. I suppose he thought it would not be noticed."

"No, he didn't," said Annie, stoutly.

"It is a lady's ring," said the Doctor, slipping his arm about the child, "and I knew that every one in the world who saw it would know that!"—

"Oh, is it a story?" asked the other child, eagerly.

"Yes, dear, it is a story," said the Doctor, putting the other arm about her.

"And a Christmas story!" added the happy child.

"A Christmas story," smiled the Doctor in agreement. "Please wait," he begged of Ruth again, for she was still pressing through phalanges of the diners toward the stairway.

"I am to wait for the story — the Christmas story — of another woman's ring!" cried Ruth, going for pride's sake, staying for her own and his sake.

"Yes, dear," smiled the young Doctor, touching the bit of lace which swept from her evening dress.

Ruth snapped the lace away and would have given the world to get it back to him, for that touch upon her dress was almost a touch upon her person. And no one could mean so much by so little as the grave young Doctor who took each case to his conscience. She drew herself away from him as far as two feet, and would have given another world to blot out that bit of space.

"I meant you to wait," said the Doctor, "for me to take you to your room. Then — yes, on the way, if you like — I will tell you the story."

"And not us?" cried Helen Sarony.

"And not us?" echoed Mrs. Prime.

"He is quite at liberty to stay and tell it to you," said Ruth, moving decidedly to the stairway. But here the rebels caught and held her.

"Ruth," protested Marjorie, "you are ending our house-party with a quarrel!"

"Yes, dear, you must think of us," smiled Mrs. Prime, putting two detaining arms about her.

"Ruth!" warned Peggy Grame, "don't you know that they say he is the best doctor in all the whole world!"

"And that doesn't mean pious, only just good," whispered Lucille.

"And good in this case," added big Jane Morgan, "means simply lovely!"

But this way of composing a quarrel did not appeal to Ruth. She and the Doctor had agreed that if they should marry they would quarrel with their arms about each other.

"Why didn't he tell me?" snapped Ruth again.

The Doctor turned from smiling to the children and smiled at Ruth.

"It was so very sacred, Ruth, dear —"

"Oh, ho! Sacred!" It was the last straw. Ruth tossed her head and increased the space between them by at least six inches.

"You know some things are so sacred, so wonderful" — he looked into the fire and halted in his

speech — “so utterly beyond human speech to transmit that one hesitates to desecrate them with words. There is a sort of language within which never reaches the lips! Though I ought to have told you!”

“That isn’t a story!” chided little Annie.

“No,” agreed Helen, disappointedly.

“No,” laughed the young Doctor with a comforting hug for each. “And you shall have a story.” He nodded energetically. “We will have no false pretenses. Now let me think a minute. There must be a story somewhere inside of me — if I can only get at it. But the deuce of it is that they have all gone out of my poor old head to-night. I can’t find one!” He laughed and playfully cudgelled his head.

As he stood there with an arm about each child, facing the fire, Marjorie, whose wedding was only three weeks off, also slipped two arms about Ruth from behind, and, resting her soft chin upon her friend’s shoulder, whispered:

“Look! There’s a man! If you don’t take him before the evening’s over I’ll throw Dan over and try for him myself!”

“Well,” snapped Ruth as savagely as Ruth could snap, “you may. A man who wears another woman’s ring on his finger for a year without a word of explanation — that’s just why we’re

not *quite* engaged, thank Heaven. Because he wouldn't tell me and I wouldn't ask him — about that cheap little ring. It's all over, I tell you, and I'm glad I have found him out in time!"

Though, to tell the truth, Ruth did not seem as glad as her words.

The two children, after collecting all the cushions and pillows in the room, drew the Doctor to the floor, where each of them appropriated a place at his side.

It was Ruth's opportunity to go. But Peggy and Lucille and Marjorie and Jane and others hedged her about and kept her, although the more they kept her the more eager she seemed to go.

"Sh!" whispered Marjorie.

"I'm as fond of stories as the children," added Lucille.

"And he tells a story — well, you know how, Ruth! Heavens! He drags my soul out of me! You've simply got to stay," coerced big Jane, drawing Ruth to her knees. "And, after all, he doesn't even know that we are here now. And he won't till the story is ended. Then he'll look about and take notice. See! He's in his usual trance. Don't you just love his trances?"

"Say," said Peggy, "do you think the man is posing for us?"

"Not a bit of it!" answered Jane. "That's just him. Give him a bunch of kids like that —

and a story — well, it's a pretty picture, anyhow! And we are going to get into it."

And big Jane saw that they all sat on the floor entrenched among cushions and as near to the picture as possible.

The serious Doctor, indeed, seemed to have forgotten all but the children. He shook his head in doubt and looked vacantly into the fire.

"Nothing could be better," whispered Marjorie to the obdurate Ruth as she cuddled up on one side and drew Peggy into the same relation on the other, "for a lovely story than this. I am so full — so comfortable — so happy —"

"I hope it will be funny," sighed Peggy, contentedly.

"Isn't the fire wonderful?" asked Jane.

"Turn down the lamps a little more," whispered Lucille, always anxious for the appropriateness of the scene.

Peggy did this and returned to the nest she had made. Ruth said not a word, but maintained the haughtiness of the deceived fiancée, although, when Marjorie stuffed some soft cushions behind her back and gently drew her from her stiff uprightness to a pretty relaxation among them she did let an arm go about each of the girls, whereat Jane moved in front and reclined in her lap.

Now, then, how could she go? She was surrounded.

"I can't think of a thing, kiddies," laughed the Doctor.

"You can, too!" denied Helen, vehemently.

"When I'm as big as you," said little Annie, reproachfully, "I expect to be full — just full of stories!"

"Besides, you know, my dear kiddies," the Doctor whimsically protested, "my stories are always sad."

"That is what we like," said Annie.

"I'm just crazy to cry!" alleged Helen.

"Christmas stories are never sad, kiddies," said the Doctor, "but joyous."

"I always feel joyous when I cry," said the laughing Annie, solemnly. "And better."

"And that's what Christmas stories are for — to make a body better, aren't they?"

"This one, which Ruth dislikes, has made me better," said the Doctor.

"Gee!" said Helen, "I didn't think you had to be better!"

"No one does," added Annie, looking around at the savage Ruth.

At that the Doctor looked, too. And he, somehow, kept on looking.

"You look lovely that way!" whispered Peggy with a chuckle. "Don't move!"

"He can't keep his eyes off you!" added Jane.

"Don't look at him! That'll make him sorry."

Marjorie slid Ruth so close to the Doctor that he could reach out and touch her. He did.

"May I tell the little children the story of the ring, Ruth?" he asked.

An angry reply came to the lips of gentle Ruth. But Marjorie put her hand before the words which would have wounded, and answered for her:

"Yes."

"It isn't for them, it's for you, ninny," whispered Peggy.

"And us," added Jane.

"I can't think of another story for them. And to-night this one — you are all so gentle that I can tell it. I couldn't, couldn't, before! May I?"

Ruth had so far succumbed that she weakly said nothing, though a "No" would have stopped the story, and big Jane said commandingly:

"Go on!"

II — WHEN THE LITTLE LADY FELL ILL

“**O**NCE upon a time,” the Doctor began, “I knew a little lady as gentle and sweet as any here.” He smiled over at Ruth, who did not answer the smile. “One day she sent for me. She was ill. I can shut my eyes and see her now. She lay upon her bed with her bronze hair afloat upon the pillow like pictures I have seen of Diana of the Moon. She smiled as I came in and held out a hand tiny and soft and very white. Her teeth shone between her crimson lips and there were beautiful violet lights in her brown eyes. She was so small and frail that I always thought of her as a butterfly. For, also, she was full of life and spirit. Yet sometimes I thought how brief the life of a butterfly is — one day! And sometimes I would stop and fear that it might be so with her, she was so fragile.

“Now here she was in bed and sending for the doctor, *she* who had almost never before needed a doctor. At first we did not think it serious. But presently we knew that it was. A great operation was decided upon. She only

asked how long she would be out of the sun — butterfly-like. We thought the operation would heal. But it did not — and there was another and another. For a little while after each operation she did get back to the sun and was very happy, just as a butterfly might be to be set free from your hand! You know how it goes straight to the flower. And perhaps you know how easily such a bright spirit would forget sorrow and suffering and even the pain of the surgeon's knife and remember only joy. It takes only a little, a very little, joy to make such an one forget a great deal of sorrow.

“ But at last we knew that the frail little body could not withstand another operation and that the end was near — very near. Then came the fourteenth of December, when, they told me, it was my duty to tell the little butterfly. That night I walked the streets — all the long night. I think it rained and that I got very wet. But I am not sure. I did not feel it. I did not know. In the morning, when I looked the sun of another day in the face and knew again the wonder of night and day, the mystery of birth and death in Nature, I understood, also, why some must die who we think should live. In the rain and the night I think I had unconsciously been with the God who gives and who takes away — always, I

think, well and wisely — if we only knew! I was brave enough to do then what I could not have done the day before. I went, gaunt with the night's agony, but smiling, and took the two little hands into mine.

“ ‘Did you ever wonder,’ I asked her, ‘as I have, why God gives life only to take it away?’

“ ‘Just for love,’ she smiled. ‘He wants the best Himself. God has a right to be selfish.’

“ ‘Yes! Do you know,’ I said, ‘that you are very ill?’

“ ‘Am I?’ she said, suddenly turning her great, startled eyes upon me.

“ ‘Haven’t you noticed,’ I tried to go on, ‘that you —’

“ ‘No,’ she said breathlessly. ‘You said I would get well — always said it. And I knew that you knew and I trusted you. Was I wrong?’

“ ‘Doctors must do those things,’ I pleaded, ‘because it keeps up the patient’s courage. There is no medicine like hope.’

“ ‘I have never thought till now,’ she halted, ‘that I would not get well.’

“ ‘I have known it for a long time,’ I said.

“ ‘And you have been so sweet and brave so as to —’

“ ‘No,’ I interrupted, ‘I have deceived you only that you might live a little longer. I, too, am selfish.’

"We were silent for a long time. Then she reached out and touched my hand. Her own was very cold.

" 'Then you mean,' she whispered, 'that —'

"I closed her lips and she understood.

"Yes! God does want the best himself!"

" 'Poor doctor!' she said, thinking first of me and not of herself. 'It is dreadful to make *you* the bearer of such a message.' She thought silently a long while. Then she said again: 'At first I was inclined to be cross at you for deceiving me. But now' — a tear presently stole down each pale young cheek — 'but now,' she ended in a whisper, reaching out for my hand, 'it is wonderful — beautiful — very, very beautiful. One can hardly believe that there are people — like you — who willingly bear the sorrows of others.' And she gave my hand a gentle pressure.

" 'I have been only selfish,' I repeated. 'I wanted to keep you!'

" 'Yes,' she whispered, 'I understand!'

"Again we were silent a long time. I could not speak.

"Then she asked: 'How long?'

" 'Only a few days,' I answered. 'Perhaps a week — two weeks.'

" 'No!' she cried suddenly. I looked up in wonder. 'For that is Christmas. And the house will be sad — in mourning. No! You

must make me live! You must make them think I am getting well!’

“‘Ah,’ said I, ‘if we only could! But I must not deceive you any longer. It is impossible. I said two weeks — but it will not be that. Beloved, it will not be that!’

“‘It will — it must be!’ she said, suddenly rising in bed with a strength I had thought her incapable of. ‘We will pray God, and you will help, and I will. There must be some sort of tonic — stimulant — Tell me — tell me there is! You must not spoil their Christmas — on — on my account!’

“She smiled a little at the odd ending of her phrase and dropped back upon the pillow, flushed brilliant, splendid, so that even I was deceived and hoped.

“‘If you can do that — keep up such a vigor by hope and happiness, the hope of happiness for others — perhaps, with God’s help, we can — do what you wish,’ I said.

“‘Of course we can,’ she said. ‘I know it!’

“‘Then so do I,’ I said. ‘And you shall have the uttermost minute.’

“‘And when it is done,’ she said, while again the dear young spirit weakened and two tears passed under the dark lashes, ‘this which you gave me so long ago, shall be yours again — for memory!’

"She put my hand upon the ring which fitted her middle finger.

" 'A memory!' I whispered, crying myself, I am afraid, kiddies.

" 'Of the bravest and sweetest man in the world!' she said, putting a kiss upon the ring.

"She was so wonderful — with such a tremendous spirit in that brave little body — that I thought she might, even then, get well. I promised. She said that she would. But I know now that, just as I had piteously deceived her, so she was deceiving me. For in all these things she was greater and braver and stronger than I — or any one I have ever known.

"And when I came again she did seem well — quite well. Her cheeks were pink, her lips crimson, her hair was coiled and dressed. But when I wondered she only smiled and said:

" 'Paint!'

"I stood amazed. She smiled on. But I had seen the maid go hurriedly away with some toilet paraphernalia as I entered, and now I saw on one hollow cheek a too-brilliant spot of color which I approached with my handkerchief.

She put out a pathetic hand and stopped me.

" 'Paint!' she repeated piteously. 'Martha must put a "Take Care" sign on me.'

"Then she softly called the maid. Martha

came and the sick lady pointed to the spot on her cheek. The maid nodded.

" 'The Doctor came just then,' she said.

" 'Hereafter,' smiled my patient, 'the Doctor will be in the secret and you needn't run away!'

" Martha nodded, turned the key in the lock, and while the little sick lady held a mirror before her sad and smiling face she made the color right by obeying the nod of her mistress. Then the maid unlocked the door and stole away, taking the toilet things, while the little sick lady lay wearily back upon her pillow for my inspection.

" I wonder whether you can fancy the pity of it all!

" But the trick had deceived her family even more than it had deceived me. For, one by one, they came and, standing at the foot of the bed, seeing the pretty little painted creature in the only light we permitted, they were sure that she was getting better rapidly — was, in fact, almost well! And they thanked me for it! Her younger sister romped in and leaped upon the bed, crying:

" 'See, Doctor! It is all as it used to be! And it has been so long since it was all as it used to be. Dearest, soon we will be out on Saint George's Hill again, rolling together on the grass, down, down and —'

She whispered something in the ear of my pa-

tient I was not to hear and garroted her with a leviathan hug—though I saw the dear face, when it might do so safely, twitch in pain at the violence of this loving.

“ ‘Yes,’ cooed my little patient, returning the hug rapturously, ‘soon—very soon—’ But a sudden sob ended the incident. Yet, in a moment, like the sun after clouds, she smiled and all was well between the two.

“ ‘Thank you—thank you—oh, thank you so much, Doctor, dear, for giving back to me the sweetest sister in all, all the whole world!’

“Alas, the monster we were holding at bay grew by what we fed him to keep him at bay. It is always so.

“Day by day more paint was required to cover the growing pallor, and always more and more. And always more drugs to keep the dear eyes bright and the spirits from flagging. When I wasn’t by her side I was studying—searching—until there was nothing in all medical science I did not know which might prolong life. How little it was! And how soon it would all have failed but for her! There were relapses which were nearly collapses, but it was almost unearthly strange that it was she who let them come, and always when I was there and we were alone.

“The house became gay again because of the

lie we were practicing. The noises which had been hushed when there was danger were resumed. All seemed agreed that she was safely back from the great shadow and that no more soft care was needed.

“ There was at last a day when I helped at the dressing and painting: so near was the shadow that she might have flown at a breath. On that day she was supine but content in our hands. It was very sacred — all! Touching the dear flesh at intimate places. But she was so near Heaven that no one thought of it but me. And to me it was ineffable. She was like an evanescent perfume — a breath from the shadow of a wood — the drooping stem of a lily — only dimly fragrant. That, I think — that wonderful perfume of her — will always be in my nostrils. That, the touch of her, like the touch of the soft-furred, powdered wing of a butterfly, will always linger at my fingertips.

“ And so we put upon her, lying in our hands, wonderful garments and more wonderful ribbons and embroideries. And then we brushed and dressed her hair until it shone with a gracious luster, and made her white teeth shine between her crimson lips. Below her dear eyes we drove away the gathering hollows with paint. And even the little hands on that day had to be carefully “ made up ” to conceal the livid blue which

began to grow at the bases of the nails. Then, when all was ready, the rose-embroidered covering on the bed, rings on her fingers, bracelets on her arms, we sat her royally up in bed, lighted the candles, closed the blinds and let the waiting family enter — for it was the day before Christmas.”

III — WHEN HER CHRISTMAS CAME

“**T**HEY came to music — the moment
I opened the door — and invited
them — bursting with joy — in the
hall. A great old anthem! A pro-
cessional they made of it!

“‘Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah!
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.’

“Standing about her bed they sang that — so beautifully, it seemed to me, that I shall never again hear such singing. I am sure that I never have heard such. For, from each separate heart was welling a song of joy, because they thought she had come back to them!

“The dear head, which had fallen limply on her shoulder while we made her pretty, straightened as they came, and she sat there, a royal little doll, while they gathered about her bed and sang. She outheld her hands to welcome them.

“‘Like those great ladies at Versailles, in the reign of the Grand Monarch, who received in bed!’ she laughed, happy as the happiest of them.

“And someone answered this by placing on her head a splendid crown of tinsel and proclaiming her Queen of Life! Another put into her hand a great, jeweled scepter of brummagem, which exhaled exquisite perfumes at the least pressure. Yet another drew from beneath the covers the small feet and shod them in slippers of such splendor that a Queen must have envied them. Golden and jeweled they were!

“But I remember yet the gray, still-fearful, piteous figures of the father and mother. They, with an intuition which inheres in parenthood alone, never did quite believe. It was too good to be true. They came and stood dumbly at the side of the bed and half smiled, half feared through it all. They glanced about now and then to assure themselves that the note about them *was* life.

“Then came another great procession — like those progresses to Queens from Eastern countries — down to the last servant in the house, bearing gifts — then gifts again! Then flowers and green things — until the beautiful rose-embroidered covering of her bed was lost to sight under the load of flowers, and these, in turn, were blotted out with the gifts. Wonderful gifts they were! How could they not be? They were welcoming, with them, their best beloved back to

life! No such Christmas gifts had ever been seen in that loving, generous household!

"Two happy brothers clasped yet another golden bracelet on each arm: one a coiled serpent with ruby eyes, one like a great ring with a seal of mingled sapphires and diamonds — not brummagem these! On her neck was girded a chain, on her fingers were put yet other rings, and in her ears were hung more splendid gems, so that she blazed with jewels. Before her lay a splendid, filmy dress of the color she loved, rose. And with it were hat and gloves and a gay parasol which, regardless of ill luck, was opened on the bed.

"All — all gifts of life!

"And yet another procession came, bearing holly and mistletoe and garlands and crimson berries, and, last of all, a Christmas tree, all lighted and glowing with a hundred pretty things. Some carried burning torches which exhaled perfumes, and some brought the fireworks, just to make it lifelike, they said. And almost in a moment they transformed the room into a Christmas bower. The bed, the walls, the floor, bloomed in the red and white and green of Christmas. And all the while they sang softly:

"'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah!
Pilgrim through this barren land;
I am weak but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.'

“Twice, under the covers of her bed, I administered the hypodermic on which alone she now lived.

“So Christmas came — the gayest, the maddest, the saddest that house had ever known.”

IV — AND WHEN SHE WENT AWAY

“**B**UT she had barely carried it through, and when the excitement would pass we knew that no stimulant devised by man could keep her on the earth she had blessed an hour longer. She knew it, too. Before the collapse quite came she nodded — our signal — and I said:

“‘My patient is tired —’

“‘A little tired, yes,’ she smiled at them. ‘To-morrow,’ she said.

“So they all kissed the painted lips good-night, and, wishing her a happy to-morrow, went away.

And they sang that anthem. One could hear them as they receded:

“‘Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah!’

“I moved to take the heavy gifts off the bed. She stopped me with a tired smile and a shake of the head. It was all she could do just then. Life was very low. I tried to take the tinsel crown of life from her head.

“‘No,’ she shook.

"The scepter.

"'No,' again.

"Nor might I remove the gems from her fingers and arms. She wanted them all just as love had put them upon her. And so I let them be.

"'Mama said — to-morrow —' she halted.

"'Yes,' I nodded.

"'Poor mama!'

"I nodded again.

"'To-morrow,' repeated the girl, and I saw a tear steal down each cheek.

"'To-morrow,' I said, 'will you think of me?'

"'I shall always think of you,' she whispered from far away. 'My soul shall live with yours. Let yours live with mine. Be happy. I am — I *am* tired. I want to sleep — a long — long sleep!'

"For a great while we lay upon her pillow, face to face. I saw her eyes close slowly as if in sleep. I felt her dear, small hand fall from my face where it had lodged last. And then I heard her voice say:

"'Tired. Now — let — me — go!'

"And I did. As I have said, I think no stimulant devised by man could have kept her longer. And then I thought the brave little soul was entitled to its release from the dainty body which

held it in prison — and to its great reward. And so I let it go. I gave her nothing more. Slowly, very slowly, she sank to her rest.

“Presently she woke a bit and, slipping this ring from her finger, she put it on mine.

“‘Our — wedding — ring!’ she smiled. ‘Don’t forget! Never — forget! I shall — not!’

“‘I shall never forget!’ I answered. And then: ‘Can you feel my lips?’

“‘Yes,’ she whispered, ‘keep them — there.’

“‘To the last,’ I said.

“‘Promise — me — something!’ she whispered.


“‘Anything,’ I said.

“‘That you will be happy —’

“I began to protest.

“‘Yes! Don’t vex me. Love some other girl — soon — soon — God meant you for that. It would be wrong not to — I should be unhappy. Tell her of me. If her love is good she will be glad. She will love me, too — because I have loved you. She will not want you to put me out of your heart. We shall live there — together — she and I. And — God — bless her for me — because she has you — she and I. Give her our ring! I wish it — I!’

“Yet again I heard her voice. It said:



“ ‘ I don’t — want to — leave — you — I don’t ! ’

“ And again — the last time :

“ ‘ Don’t tell them till — the morning. Kiss me ! And — let me — sleep — sleep ! ’

“ At the thought of that rest a smile must have come, for there it was when the lips I touched grew cold. And, looking into the lovely painted face, I could almost fancy that it was all a lie and that the bloom upon cheek and lip was life.

“ For the tinsel crown of life was on her shining head. And the brummagem scepter of power was in her painted hand. And on her arms were blazing jewels. And her eyes were gazing straight into mine and her lips smiled. And her body lay crushed beneath a mound of gifts. And the air about her was filled with perfumes. And the green and red and white of Christmas reigned. And something in my fancy woke and said :

“ ‘ Yes, Queen of Life, always and forever, nevertheless ! This is not death ! ’

“ And I believed that saying then, and I believe it now. How could God create so splendid a thing only to take it ruthlessly, unreasonably away ! He *must* have some purpose in it all !

“ And into my mind came the beautiful Scriptures written for the dead — such beautiful

dead as this: 'Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death . . . Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.' 'Man is like to vanity.' 'He cometh forth like a flower . . . and continueth not. He fleeth as a shadow.' And on to the morning of the resurrection. And 'in my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you . . . that where I am there ye may be also.' What kind of a Mansion would that be which would house the beautiful thing lying there? It should be as no other mansion men have ever thought of, save in dreams and prayers. There should be soft airs, perfumed more exquisitely than this she had just ceased to breathe. There should be an outlook upon Heaven itself. There should be softness and sweetness and immaculateness everywhere! And in that Mansion they should call her the Exquisite One, the Queen of Life, indeed!

"A long time I sat beside her in our last earthly communion. It was hard, oh, very hard to go. For all that told me she was dead was the chill of her body when I touched it. Yet I sat there until the Christmas bells began to ring joyously. Then her eyes closed as if she slept, and I stole away. I left her there with the very peace of sleep—that which passeth understand-

ing — upon her closed lids. I left her there with life painted redly on cheek and lip, but dead — quite dead.

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“And now she lives in a city whose marble minarets shine out in the moonlight as I pass. I do not go to her there, for I cannot. I think I should stay with her. But whenever it rains I think of her House and shiver, fancying that she must, who is not there at all, but in Another Country. And yet that lovely body, with all its exquisiteness — I — I see that whenever I think of her House out there. That living thing I have touched and loved — what is it now?”

V — AND WHERE SHE LIVES

IT must have been for ten silent minutes that the eyes of the serious young Doctor looked into the fire after his voice had ceased. Then, indeed, as Jane had said, he looked about, smiled, and took notice.

"We were boy and girl together," he said then, "and I gave it to her when I was eighteen and she was twelve." He held out the ring to them in the light of the fire. "That is the story — Ruth. Shall I forget? Do you wish me to?"

Ruth did not answer. She was no longer savage. Marjorie and Peggy felt the tremors which they knew were Ruth's agony. But she put up no handkerchief. The tears rolled frankly down her face. For that was like Ruth — to fight, and then surrender in the open.

"I — I can't talk — yet —" she managed to say.

The children slept before the story had been fairly begun — one on each knee.

"She was like these," said the Doctor, touching a childish head with each hand, "a flower of life — as fair, as frail, as fragrant, as innocent!"

But his eyes were on Ruth as he spoke. He seemed to see not her, but through and beyond her. She crept to him, caring nothing now for the rest who looked on.

Yet all these gently stole away and left the two who had the account to settle alone.

But it was not much of an account, after all.

"You loved her!" cried Ruth with a sob, plunging her face against him.

"Yes," nodded the sad Doctor gently, "and always shall."

But he put his fingers slowly into the mass of the girl's hair with a movement infinitely caressing.

"I will always be second in your thoughts!" said Ruth, resisting, then compelling his caress with both her hands.

"Yes," said the Doctor again and yet again, as he turned up her face and smiled into it.

Ruth, too, smiled a bit in answer through her tears — no one ever failed to answer that smile of the sad Doctor with another. And how could Ruth, who was made to smile? Indeed she did more than smile.

"But there will never be a third?" begged Ruth, with her hands on his shoulders, her face close to his, the breath from her rose lips panting upon him.

"No, beloved," said the Doctor, "no one but her — and you!"

"Then," cried Ruth with a greater sob, "I shall love you all the more for loving that — that" — she almost shrieked it — "angel! But — but — if you — if you ever — you've got to make me think — no, no, no! I'm not an angel. I can't be like her. But I can be your wife! Put — put her ring on my finger!"

"God bless you!" whispered the sad Doctor, kissing the mouth so near his own and slipping the ring from his finger to hers.

"And I've just ruined your shirt-front crying on it!"

"Yes," smiled the young Doctor.

"Why, we're all alone!"

"Yes."

"And what are we to do with these children!"

The Doctor, silently, took one in each arm.

"Little — little ring, you are the most beautiful engagement-ring I have ever seen!" Ruth was whispering madly to the cheap circlet.

"Now," said the Doctor, "come!"

"No!" cried Ruth. "I want an arm for myself!"

So she took one of the children in her arms, and the serious young Doctor took both into his — and so they passed from the light of the Christmas fire.

But in the hallway, at the stair whence Ruth would have gone to her room, they paused, for the great clock there began to strike twelve, and all about them, like a wonderful, brazen madrigal, the Christmas bells of the near-by city began to ring. Ruth opened the door. A great lawn stretched from the back of the house. It was swathed in the pure, still white of new snow. The moon lay on it in loving patches of light. And over all was a great stillness — save for the dithyrambic chiming of the city bells. Far away, for the house stood upon a hill, shone the minarets of a City of Sleep.

Ruth thought of what he had said of her City, as she saw it, and looked up at him. Yes, he was looking there and smiling.

“Her City?” she whispered.

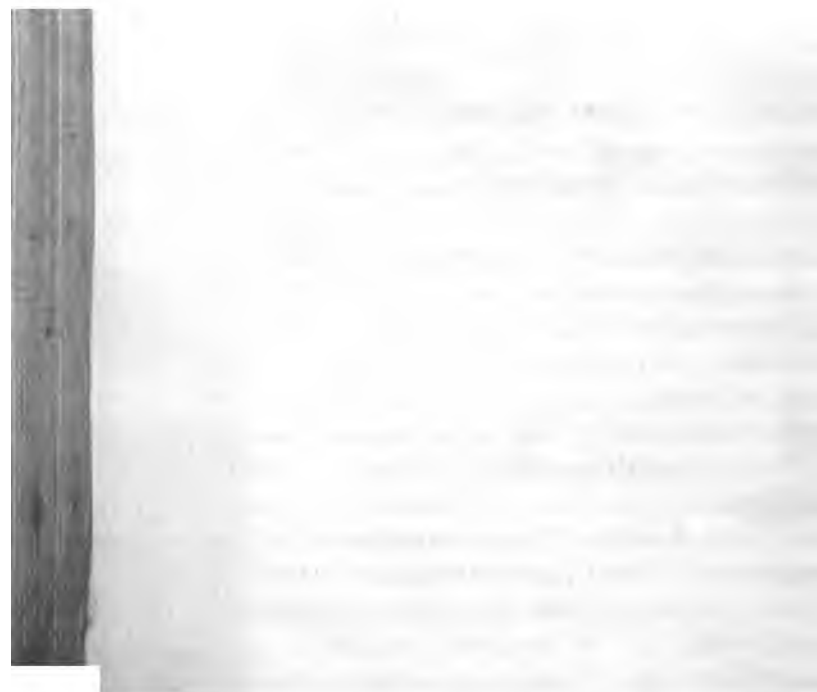
“Yes,” he said.

“But I am in your arms. And I live!” she cried. “And she wished that!”

From above the pretty, nightcapped heads of the house-party peeped over the banisters and whispered down upon them, very gently, almost as if they knew:

“Merry Christmas!”





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